銃皇無尽のファフニール III

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ツカサ

Illustration

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「本当に悪かった。
あ、謝るから……その、といてくれないか？」
この体勢はあまりに刺激的なため、
俺はフィリルに離れるよう促す。
けれどフィリルはじっと俺の顔を覗き込み、
首を横に振った。
「……ダメ。
きちんと償ってもらうまで、
といてあげない」
「つ、償うって……何をしたらいいんだよ？」
「何もしなくていい。じっとしてて」
フィリル・クレスト
Firill Crest

「……兄さん」
切なげな声で俺を呼び、
右腕にぎゅっとしがみ付いてくる深月。
パジャマ越しに感じる体温と柔らかさが右腕を包み込んだ。
小ぶりだが形のいい双丘の感触が二の腕から伝わってくる。
これでは下手に右腕を動かせない。
物部深月
Mitsuki Monobe

「わぁー！　リーザちゃん、胸おっきいね！
お湯にぷかぷか浮いてる！」
「い、イリスさん、
指で突かないでください！」
「あ、感触も何だかあたしのと違うかも。
ぷにぷにっていうより、
ふわふわで……マシュマロみたい」
「んっ……やっ――い、いい加減にしないと反撃しますわよ！」
イリス・フレイア
Iris Freyja
リーザ・ハイウォーカー
Liza Highwalker

Prologue

The sea was getting ravaged.
Countless tentacles were gradually turning the sea's navy-blue surface silver.
A giant purple eyeball was visible at the center of the radiating tentacles.
It was a strangely shaped and powerful creature.
One of the monsters under the umbrella term "dragon."
The purple dragon—"Purple" Kraken.
Swinging like whips, its serpentine tentacles were made of mithril, the hardest alloy theoretically. In addition, the antimatter projectiles shot from the purple eyeball were capable of destroying any kind of matter.
Hence, simultaneously equipped with ultimate offense and defense, "Absolute" was the name given to its powers.
"The same... as that time."
Watching from the air afar as the invading Kraken advanced towards Midgard, fourteen-year-old Mitsuki remarked quietly.
The "Blue" Hekatonkheir she saw in the past had crushed the land and trampled the neighboring town. So-called dragons were capable of destroying the world simply through their existence.
Looking at the sea surface afar, invaded by those silver tentacles, Mitsuki thought to herself.
"Don't space out, Mitsuki."
Immediately, she heard a voice beside her. In that instant, Mitsuki lost balance while she was hovering in the air by using her fictional armament to transmute air.
"H-Hey Miyako, don't get so close! Our wind will interfere with each other. You almost made me fall!"
Mitsuki hastily recovered her center of gravity and grumbled at the girl who had approached her.
"Oh sorry about that, Mitsuki, your flying skills are still a bit inexperienced."
The girl scratched her head and apologized. She was Shinomiya Miyako who had transferred into Midgard almost at the same time as Mitsuki. She was both Mitsuki's roommate and best friend, the only person whom Mitsuki did not use polite language to speak to.
With gorgeous shoulder-length black hair, Shinomiya Miyako was a girl who was aptly described as a "Yamato Nadeshiko" or idealized Japanese woman.

Furthermore, her fictional armament was shaped as a naginata, further reinforcing that image.
Capable of learning everything and anything effortlessly, she was far more skilled than Mitsuki at transmuting air to fly. Despite her jealousy towards a best friend who was like this, Mitsuki still respected and admired her.
"You two over there, cut the chit-chat! The enemy is at hand!"
The captain, Shinomiya Haruka, scolded Mitsuki and Miyako for having a private conversation.
"...Onee-chan is angry."
Miyako stuck her tongue out mischievously and remarked with a smile. She was Haruka's little sister. Compared to the straitlaced Haruka, Miyako always maintained a calm mood capable of joking around. Hence, the two sisters could be described as polar opposites in personality. However, they were quite alike in appearance, especially in facial resemblance, from the same mold, one could say.
"Thanks, Miyako."
Mitsuki thanked Miyako quietly. Seeing Mitsuki stunned by the Kraken's intimidating sight, Miyako must have been trying to ease her nervousness.
"Hmm? Why are you thanking me?"
Miyako smiled to cover up then formed her dark matter into a naginata—the night-slicing blade, Kusanagi—and pointed it at the Kraken in the distance.
"...Let's do our best, Mitsuki. To protect Midgard—To protect our home."
Despite the smile on her face, Miyako spoke to Mitsuki solemnly.
"...Yes."
Mitsuki's expression tensed and she nodded.

Even now, having reached the age of sixteen, Mitsuki could still clearly remember Miyako's smile from that time.
The scene was branded deeply on the back of her eyes.
Just by closing her eyes, she could recall it any time.
Because—what Mitsuki had seen was her best friend's final smile.

Chapter 1 - The Invading Basilisk

Part 1

Somehow, I found myself having trouble breathing. My body was unable to move.
Every breath I took came with a whiff of fragrance.
Although smothered, it did not feel unpleasant at all. With that kind of unbelievable feeling, I opened my eyes slightly.
Then I was so surprised that I even forgot to breathe.
...!?
In front of my eyes was pale skin. Tender as a newborn baby's, skin giving off a fragrant scent—A voluptuous bust was covering my face.
"Mmm... Mononobe..."
Someone was calling my name lightly next to my ear. It seemed like someone was hugging me.
As for that someone—I was 80-90% sure it was Iris.
Without looking at her face, I could instantly tell from her voice.
Iris Freyja was my classmate in Brynhildr Class, a beautiful maiden with sparkling silver hair.
She was also the only person who had given me the taste of a kiss.
But that was like a reward gift—Although Iris and I were good friends, it was not the kind of relationship where we could be locked passionately in embrace like this in bed.
Hence, my mind was in turmoil. Despite trying to figure out the situation, I could not think properly.
Iris' bodily scent and soft bosom was blanking out my mind.
"Ah... Mononobe... Mmm..."
Hearing Iris' voice next to my ear, my back shuddered.
It felt like someone was using her fingers to comb my hair. Iris was apparently awake.
Then I heard the sound of someone sniffing.
"Mononobe's smell, sure enough... it's so soothing..."
Iris buried her face in my hair, exhaling hot breath.
I shifted my gaze to confirm. Although Iris had her top unbuttoned, she essentially still had her clothes on. She was wearing her school uniform.
My view was dominated by Iris' chest, which prevented me from acquiring more detailed information. But as my brain started to operate after waking up, I recalled that this was a sickroom in the medical building rather than my own room.

I was injured during the battle five days earlier—in other words, "Blue" Hekatonkheir and Kili's attack on Midgard, which was why I was currently under treatment in the medical building.
Although the more heavily injured left shoulder still could not move, the fever arising from my wounds had subsided. Starting today, I could attend classes. Hence, I was scheduled to be discharged today if there were not problems.
"...Mononobe will feel soothed too, right... Hugging you like this... You'll forget your pain and suffering, right...?"
Iris hugged my head tightly, burying the tip of my nose in her cleavage. It felt very soft, warm and comfortable—even though I was almost about to suffocate.
I heard the beat of Iris' heart. Or was this my own heartbeat?
"Don't worry, Mononobe... You won't have nightmares as long as someone is by your side... Because I didn't have nightmares that time."
Iris was probably talking about the time when "White" Leviathan had targeted her. To help her feel at ease, I had lent my back for her to lean on.
—Maybe I was having a nightmare earlier.
Although I had no recollection of it, that was probably the case. Now that the painkiller's effect had subsided, my left shoulder was hurting. It did not come as a surprise that I would have nightmares in such a state.
I guessed that Iris was doing this to put me at ease. After figuring out the reason, I was not longer panicking but that still did not change the situation.
Or perhaps, now that I had less to think about and occupy my mind, I became even more strongly conscious of Iris' body warmth.
Iris relaxed her embrace slightly, murmuring softly to herself:
"However... For some reason, even though my emotions are clearly calm... my body is getting hot—something seems to be tugging at my heart... even though it didn't happen before... it doesn't feel right somehow... so weird... hmm—"
Iris' exhaled breaths were hot. She moved, causing our bodies, in close contact, to touch and rub against each other, forcing me to hold my breath for several seconds. Had I not done that, I might have succumbed to an indescribable impulse.
"Ah... Mmm... Mononobe..."
Iris moved restlessly, calling my name in a somewhat lamenting manner.
Iris' heart had been beating fast since a while ago. My heart was beating madly too.
At this rate, it was only a matter of time before I lost self-control. But under such conditions, even if I told her I had already woken up, I had a feeling that it would still bring about something irrevocable.
"Ya... Mmm..."

Iris exhaled hot breath and sandwiched my face between her soft breasts. I understood that there was no time to lose, so I called upon my inexperienced "acting skills."

"Ooh..."
I deliberately groaned as a hint to Iris that I was about to wake up.
"Hyah!?"
Iris immediately screamed and released my head. Normally speaking, I should have woken up from her cry but I continued to pretend I was still asleep.
"Hmm..."
"M-Mononobe, don't wake up yet! Don't wake up!"
Iris frantically climbed off the bed. As reluctant as I was to leave her body warmth, I did not try to make her stay. Then after counting thirty seconds silently in my mind, I opened my eyes lightly with caution.
"G-Good morning, Mononobe!"
Iris was sitting in a chair next to the bed, smiling stiffly as she greeted me. Her face was still flushed red but I deliberately pretended not to notice and responded:
"Good morning, Iris, why did you come here this early in the morning...?"
Seeing that her unbuttoned top was already fixed up, I secretly felt relieved and asked her that. At the moment, the digital clock on the side of the sickbed read 6am.
"Oh, umm, Mononobe, you're going to class starting today, right? So I wanted to welcome you back!"
"Welcome me back... I'm happy you're doing that but isn't it a bit too early?"
Although Iris' busty embrace had swept all sense of drowsiness from me, I would normally be asleep at this hour.
"Oh, right, actually I was planning to wake you up later. So... I'm sorry. If you're still sleepy, you can continue sleeping, you know?"
Iris spoke apologetically.
"It's okay, I feel particularly energized waking up today so I'm not sleepy. This is probably because—I had a good dream."
"I-I see!"
Iris replied happily, a smile blooming on her face.
It was probably thanks to Iris that I did not remember the contents of my nightmare. Surely, it was Iris' heartbeat and body warmth that had driven away my feelings of suffering.
But since I could not thank her directly while feigning ignorance, my only choice was to tell a little lie and say I had a good dream.
No, in actual fact after waking up, I really did enjoy a wonderful dream.
I could not help but recall Iris' snow-white skin, so I hastily shook my head to drive those thoughts away.
"Mononobe, what's with you? Do you know that your face is very red?"
Despite her own red face, Iris asked me with puzzlement.
I suppressed the urge to retort, avoided eye contact and said "it's nothing."
"Really? Then since you have to get up, Mononobe, why don't I help you change? Your left arm can't move, so it must be inconvenient, right?"

Iris stood up from her seat and brought over the school uniform that was hanging in the closet. My sister Mitsuki had brought this uniform from the dorm for me yesterday.
"Sure, that'd be a great help—"
However, I stopped mid-sentence. I discovered there would be a serious problem if she helped me to change.
"—No wait, forget it! I can get changed on my own!"
Not only had I just woken up, I had also viewed Iris' tender skin up close immediately after waking up. How could I calm down immediately? If I undressed under such conditions, things would be extremely bad.
"Jeez, Mononobe, you're a patient. You're not allowed to act polite towards me. If you move forcefully, your wound might open up."
Iris had a very good point. Unless I told her the real reason, she was probably not going to be dissuaded. But that would only make the mood turn embarrassing. This was foreseeable too.
"T-That's right, but... there might be an examination in the morning, so it's fine to get changed after that..."
Since I could not find an excuse, I tried to stall for time so that I could calm down first.
"Oh, I asked the nurse about that already. She said you just need to make a visit to the infirmary before going to class. Also, I heard that breakfast will be served at the school cafeteria, so let's go together after you're done changing."
Iris smiled with 100% benevolent intentions. Given her carelessness, this was quite well thought out of her, but it mercilessly sealed off my avenues of escape.
"No, but..."
Just as I was breaking out in cold sweat, thinking of excuses, Iris peered at my face as though she figured out something.
"Mononobe, don't tell me... you're shy about getting undressed by me?"
"Urgh..."
Iris was not far from the truth, rendering me speechless. Immediately, she made an expression as though a great idea had occurred to her and chuckled.
"I see, so Mononobe gets shy too! I was so embarrassed when you saw me naked, Mononobe, with this we'll be even."
Perhaps as revenge for that time, Iris gleefully reached towards my clothing.
"H-Hey, wait! Wait first, just a short while!"
"No, don't move recklessly or it'll affect your injuries, okay? Don't move."
Iris climbed onto the bed and pinned me down lightly. Then straddling directly me like that, she began to unbutton my light-green hospital gown.
"H-Hey!?"
"Fufu, it feels like you're a bit cute today, Mononobe, hmm... Weird? What is this...? It feels like something's poking my bum—"

"!?"
Just as the situation turned desperate, the sickroom's door was opened loudly.
"Ah! What are you doing, Iris!?"
The petite little girl with horns on her head entered the room and yelled loudly.
Saying she had horns on her head was not a metaphor for anger. Rather, it was a true description of her appearance. A D named Tia Lightning. Her age would put her in elementary school, but due to various reasons, she had transferred into Brynhildr Class where I studied.
Shaking her beautiful fluttering hair, which looked pink in the light, Tia rushed over to the side of my bed.
"Yuu will become Tia's husband! S-So, not allowed to do dirty thing with anyone apart from the wife!"
Tia climbed on the bed and pushed aside Iris, who was straddling me.
"W-We're not doing anything dirty. I just wanted to help Mononobe get changed!"
Iris exchanged glares with Tia across me, but her face was still blushing. Because she realized what the scene looked like to others, with her straddling and undressing me.
"Then Tia will help Yuu change too! Because taking care of the husband is the wife's job!!"
"You haven't married Monobe, Tia, so you don't have that kind of priority! So first come first served. I tried very hard today to get up early!"
Refusing to back down against the aggressive Tia, Iris retorted and argued. I could almost see sparks flying between them. No, there really could be sparks because Tia had a bad habit. Whenever she got emotional, she would subconsciously generate dark matter, converting it into electrical currents.
"....."
Without interjecting thoughtlessly, I quietly watched them argue.
Normally, I would have intervened to stop them, but right now, what I needed most was time.
After roughly ten minutes, Iris and Tia finally reached an agreement. They would cooperate and take turns to assist me in changing.
During those ten minutes, I finally managed to settle down.

Part 2

Twenty-five years ago, the first dragon—"Black" Vritra—made its appearance in the sky above Japan.
Ever since, children possessing the same power as Vritra—the Ds with the ability to generate dark matter—were born among humans. The tropical island where they were gathered was Midgard here.
When Midgard was first established, it leaned heavily towards a detention facility in purpose, but now, it had become a self-governed organization with massive influence over the world.
There was extremely high economic value in the ability to transmute dark matter into any substance. Hence, Ds contributed to society by using their powers to undertake jobs to produce rare resources.
However, Midgard also had an undisclosed function. Namely, to intercept and defeat dragons that were attacking in search of *mates*.
Targeted Ds would turn into the same type of dragon when they came into contact with the dragon targeting them. Currently a target, Tia Lightning was sitting on my lap.
The red dragon—"Red" Basilisk—had chosen Tia and was apparently crossing the African continent right now in pursuit of her. However, there was an ocean between Midgard and the continent, hence, it was still unknown whether Basilisk would cross the ocean, seeing as its body structure was not suited to swimming.
"Here, say ah—"
Sitting sideways on my lap—more precisely, on my thigh—Tia was bringing a sandwich towards me with an innocent and pure smile on her face.
She looked completely carefree but until five days ago, she had been insisting she was a dragon, thus raising a huge wall between herself and the other Ds.
But in response to her classmates' gentle treatment, Tia had by her own will rejected Kili, the leader of the dragon worshiping cult the Sons of Muspell, thus choosing to live with us as a human. That was why she was staying here now.
Initially, Tia had refused to leave my side but because I was hospitalized, she was currently living with her classmate Lisa in the student dormitories.
"Yuu, hurry up."
Asking me to indulge her, Tia urged me to open my mouth. Although she was now getting along well with others, she still did not change her

tendency to make me dote on her. Although I had suggested to her that I hope she would not sit on my lap anymore, Tia insisted that she could hold herself back during class but I had to obey her now.
"...Can't be helped."
I gave up resisting and obediently bit the sandwich.
We were currently in the cafeteria on the ground floor of the catering building. Of course there were other people watching and this sort of behavior was very embarrassing, but if I declined, Tia and Iris might start arguing again.
In the sickroom earlier, Tia and Iris had reached a consensus to take turns helping me change. But they continued to "care" for me even while we were traveling to the cafeteria.
"Mononobe, it's my turn next."
Sitting on my right, Iris leaned closer and presented me with a sandwich. As a side note, Tia was feeding me an egg sandwich while Iris was holding a tuna sandwich.
My right hand could move normally so it made me feel bad that I even needed help to eat meals. Nevertheless, when I voiced my view, Iris' answer was "this has nothing to do with that."
"...Thanks."
Ignoring the surrounding gazes, I bit Iris' sandwich as well.
"Ehehe!"
Iris' face relaxed and she made a happy expression. Feeling unable to look her in the eye, I chewed the sandwich while my gaze kept wandering.
"Hurry hurry, eat Tia's too."
Seeing this, Tia impatiently extended her sandwich again.
Under their urging, I ate their sandwiches in alternate bites. However, eating sandwiches alone made me start to feel thirsty.
But because the sandwiches were delivered to my mouth without pause, I could not find the chance to speak for a long time.
"—Tia-san, Iris-san, this cannot be called care, you know?"
Immediately, a voice was heard with sighing tones.
I turned my head to look at the source, instantly making eye contact with a pair of clear blue eyes.
"Gulp... Good morning, Lisa."
I hastily swallowed the sandwich in my mouth and greeted my classmate, Lisa Highwalker. Lisa tossed her long blonde hair and answered me with a scowl.
"Good morning. How exalted your position must be, to have two girls serving you so early in the morning."
Hearing Lisa's sarcastic tone, I frantically explained myself.
"No, I didn't ask them to serve me. They're trying to help me in my injured state—"
"Oh, is that so? But do you truly need the assistance?"
"Well..."

If it was just eating, I could manage without their help, so I fell speechless.
"Letting others help unnecessarily is tantamount to asking them to serve you. Also, Tia-san and Iris-san—The two of you have erred to an absurd extent."
"Kyah!?"
"...Lisa so scary."
Hearing Lisa's harsh tone of voice, Iris and Tia shrank their shoulders in fright.
"Did you know that excessive care may sometimes burden the receiver? You two should try to think from his perspective and only assist him on necessary tasks."
After saying that, Lisa took a cup of water that was on the table and presented it to me.
"...You are thirsty, am I correct?"
"Y-Yeah, thanks."
I thanked her and took the cup with my left hand, then drank the entire cup.
"Mononobe Yuu, you must decide for yourself the occasion when you need to ask for help. If it is something truly necessary, I will assist you with my full power too."
Despite turning her head away fiercely, Lisa made me that kind of offer.
Stunned, Iris and Tia stared at Lisa.
"Lisa-chan is so cool..."
Iris murmured with eyes of worship.
"Lisa is amazing..."
Tia offered her a gaze of respect.
"I-I simply said something that was a matter of fact."
Seeing Lisa explain modestly in embarrassment, I also praised her.
"Lisa really is a good woman indeed."
On further thought, it was quite unnatural for Lisa to appear on campus early in the morning. Perhaps she had come to school this early for the sake of helping me resume school life.
"Y-You are saying that again! Is making me the brunt of your jokes that amusing!?"
Instantly gone red in the face, Lisa glared at me viciously.
"No, I'm not joking about you. It's just that I couldn't think of any other way of putting it."
"Then my wish is that you could study seriously and learn more vocabulary."
Arms crossed, Lisa replied unhappily but her cheeks remained red.
Seeing that kind of reaction from her, I could not help but smile. This time, I really wanted to play a joke on her.
But just as I was about to tease her, there was suddenly a quiet commotion coming from the lounge where the vending machine was located. Noticing unusual vibes in the voices, everyone stopped what they were doing.
"Did something happen?"
Intrigued, Iris asked quietly.

There were staff having breakfast in the cafeteria like us and they also looked towards the lounge, unsure what had happened. Things like "hey, come over here" and "what's going on..." could be heard from the lounge.
"Yuu... Tia has a bad feeling about this."
Tia clutched my uniform tightly with a worried look.
Only then did I remember that apart from the vending machine, there was also a satellite television in the lounge as well.
"Let us head over to verify what happened."
Saying that, Lisa urged us to move.
Hence, The four of us went to the lounge and saw many staff with their eyes fixated on the television. Shown on the screen was the overhead view of a coast somewhere.
"What..."
Seeing that screen, I was instantly speechless.
One type of news had absolutely first priority no matter which country in the world.
Namely, news regarding dragons that moved around on whim without regard for national borders, the disasters they caused, as well as disaster predictions.
Currently airing were images from news linked to a dragon disaster.
But this was a type of dragon disaster I had never seen before.
The sea had a patch of it dyed pure white. Judging from the map on the right of the screen, the scene was near the equator on the African continent, a place where the ocean could not possibly freeze.
In fact, whether the words on screen or what the newscaster reported, neither indicated that the ocean was exhibiting a freezing phenomenon.
What the news reported was—
Moving across the African continent, after reaching the coast, Basilisk had turned the surrounding seawater into salt completely.

Part 3

"I believe many of you have already learned through the media that Basilisk has finally begun to cross the sea."
Standing on the podium, announcing gravely was my little sister, who was simultaneously the student council president of Midgard *Academy*—Mononobe Mitsuki. Despite her short stature, one did not get any impression of unreliability from her. A sense of solemnity could be felt from her tense expression.
"Believed to be unable to swim on grounds of its bodily structure, Basilisk is turning seawater into salt. Rather than taking the land route of the Eurasian continent, it is advancing towards Midgard along the shortest distance. Roughly one month from now, it will have crossed the Indian Ocean, passing the Indonesian archipelago to reach us."
A slight clamor arose between the students after listening to Mitsuki.
The first day I returned to school, the timetable was suddenly changed to hold an impromptu full-school assembly. Mitsuki was originally visiting me frequently at the sickroom, but today was the only day when she did not appear, probably because of the Basilisk incident. Also, the assembly was taking place in the sports ground instead of the usual gym.
When the clock tower was destroyed by Hekatonkheir the other day, its debris had apparently struck the gym's roof directly. Hence, the gym was currently barred from usage. Looking around me, I could see the lower half of the slanted, collapsed and bifurcated clock tower.
"However, this development is within our expectations. Midgard and NIFL has independently planned operations capable of dealing lethal damage to Basilisk and made preparations. We have sufficient chances of victory."
Perhaps to encourage everyone, Mitsuki declared firmly, causing many students to nod in response with determined expressions. Since recent lessons involved training under the assumption of fighting Basilisk, everyone had a certain level of confidence and preparedness. There was no gloomy mood like for Leviathan's attack.
"Detailed plans will be explained to members selected for the Counter-Dragon Squad. Please prepare yourselves, everyone."
After announcing the necessary facts concisely, Mitsuki descended from the podium.

Although noon had not arrived yet, the sun was already shining intensely. Perhaps Mitsuki had judged that a long speech in tropical Midgard would be a bad idea.
After a teacher went on the podium to make a few announcements, the full-school assembly was dismissed.
"After hearing Mitsuki-chan's speech, it really feels like there won't be problem."
Walking side by side with me, Iris spoke.
"Mitsuki so cool, as expected of Yuu's little sister."
On my other side, Tia also praised Mitsuki.
"...Yeah."
Although I concurred with them, I was feeling uneasy inside.
I felt the same thing when Leviathan invaded. When fighting dragons, Mitsuki's mindset was likewise troubling.
Just now, although she had urged everyone to prepare themselves mentally, in Mitsuki's case, it seemed like she had prepared too much. In other words, I felt that she seemed to be leaving no margin to spare mentally.
Mitsuki had personally killed her dragonified best friend in the past. She had also said that she was continuing to battle in order to atone for that crime.
Hence, I had also vowed to put everything on the line to terminate her battle.
Even if Mitsuki did not want me to help, I had no intention of going against my vow.
—If Mitsuki does anything reckless, I must stop her.
I was thinking over these matters while returning to our classroom—Brynhildr Class. In the 3x3 arrangement of seats, I was sitting in the back row in the center, flanked by Iris and Mitsuki.
Earlier, Tia had kept treating my lap as her seat but now, she was sitting in the seat in front of me. Turning her head back, her gaze seemed to be asking me, "Is Tia obedient?"
"Very obedient."
I caressed her head. Tia showed a contented smile and turned to face the front.
Sitting on her two sides were the red-haired prodigy, Ren Miyazawa, and the tomboy, Ariella Lu. Tia naturally began to chat with them. Watching this from behind, I knew she had no more problems. I could finally relax. Tia was already getting along as a member of Brynhildr Class.
Seated in the front row were Lisa and the bibliophile who was always reading, Firill Crest. The seat between them was empty. Before I transferred in, the entire middle column was unused, but now, that seat was the only *opening* left in the Brynhildr Class.
At this moment, the door opened. Homeroom teacher Shinomiya-sensei and Mitsuki entered together.

Seeing the one empty seat that was now emphasized, what would Mitsuki think? I was quite curious about this.
Student No. 4, Shinomiya Miyako, was Shinomiya-sensei's little sister and also Mitsuki's best friend.
Were she still alive, all the seats in the classroom would be filled.
"—Please be quiet, everyone. Homeroom time still has not ended, so please listen to a few words from me."
Mitsuki stood at the lectern and swept her gaze across us while she spoke.
Everyone stopped chatting and directed their gaze at Mitsuki.
On the other hand, Shinomiya-sensei was sitting in the chair next to the lectern, using the register book in her hand to fan herself.
"The members of the Counter-Dragon Squad for this operation will be centered on our Brynhildr Class. Most likely, every member of the class will be selected. Hence, I will first tell you about the operation's key points."
Almost everyone...? In other words, everyone apart from Tia who was being targeted by Basilisk?
I found it a bit strange but did not interrupt, deciding to listen to Mitsuki first.
"Basilisk fires red beams from its eyes, using the light to turn the target of its *gaze* into stone, dust or salt. The range approaches five kilometers, which is why we cannot fight it directly but must find cover to block its line of sight. However, there are objects for cover on the sea. Consequently, Midgard has decided that the most effective tactic is to lure Basilisk to a desert island in neighboring waters, then blow Basilisk to smithereens together with the island."
Hearing that, Ariella raised her hand to ask a question.
"You mentioned luring Basilisk, but how?"
"Tia-san will be transported to that island temporarily. Because Basilisk's target is Tia-san, it will surely head towards the island. Naturally, before Basilisk arrives, we will let Tia-san retreat."
"Oh, that sounds like it'll work."
Putting down her hand, Ariella seemed to accept the answer. It felt like she had expected this answer more or less.
Then Firill raised her hand and asked Mitsuki:
"...What are chances that the island will be flattened by Basilisk as soon as it enters visual range?"
"According to data collected so far, even when Basilisk turns vegetable impeding its advance into dust, the landscape remains unaltered. Or rather, even after getting exposed to the red beams, the land does not show significant changes."
"...Now that is quite unbelievable. So Basilisk's red beam is not purely a high firepower attack?"
After listening to Firill, Mitsuki nodded solemnly.
"Indeed. Although there have been various theories regarding Basilisk's ability, abundant data has been obtained from the current incident. Hence,

we are currently drawing deductions to narrow down the overall direction. Before the operation is put into action, it should be possible to put forward a more accurate theory."
Basilisk's ability was not fully analyzed yet, it seemed. For one thing, it had stayed in the desert for the past twenty years or so since it appeared, hence a lack of data was very normal.
Prior to this, Basilisk was a dragon that caused no problems unless one approached it. Of course, the country where Basilisk made its residence had things tough, but nothing happened as long as one kept their distance. But precisely because nothing happened, no data was gathered about the dragon, and now, that was the price paid.
All the anti-Basilisk training conducted so far were probably based on the assumption of that Basilisk would not leave the desert.
I had to take a test where I had to attack and pierce diamond from a distance of a hundred meters. But now, it was obvious that getting that close to Basilisk was impossible no matter what. The drills on close range combat probably assumed the battlefield would be the desert with things like sand dunes for cover.
"—Anyone have other questions?"
Mitsuki swept her gaze across us and asked.
Since no one else seemed to have one, I decided to pose the question that had bothered me from the start.
"I do."
I raised my right arm. Mitsuki turned her gaze at me.
"Go ahead, Nii-san."
"Just now, Mitsuki, you mentioned that almost every member of Brynhildr Class will be selected for the Counter-Dragon Squad, which means someone will be excluded?"
At first, I thought Tia would stay behind but according to Mitsuki, she was the center of the operation and absolutely indispensable. This meant that there was someone else who would be excluded.
"Well, although it has not been confirmed yet... I intend to have you stay behind, Nii-san."
"What... Me? Why?"
I asked in surprise.
"Obvious, is it not? Because you are a patient."
"No, wait a sec, there's almost a month until the battle against Basilisk, right? Before that, my wounds would have healed. Taking part in the operation shouldn't be a problem."
I hastily objected but Mitsuki sighed with an exasperated look on her face.
"What would be the point of straining yourself to take part? What this operation requires is high offensive power. Although you possess anti-dragon weapons, Nii-san, you also mentioned before that they cannot be used from unstable positions such as ships or in the air, right?"
"That's... true, yeah."

Countered so completely, I began to stammer.
The anti-dragon weapons I created by borrowing other people's dark matter were only parts from the lost weapon known as Marduk. Hence, there were many incomplete functions. If standing somewhere unstable, I had no confidence I could aim accurately. In addition, I had no idea whether my foothold would be able to withstand the recoil.
"When destroying Basilisk together with the island, of course the attacks will be launched from a ship. Hence, there is no need for you, Nii-san. Furthermore, Lisa-san is enough as the candidate to look after Tia-san."
"Hmm..."
Mitsuki's argument was perfectly logical, but I could not bring myself to agree candidly. If she were to do anything reckless, I needed to be at her side to stop her.
I racked my brain, trying to think of an excuse to use.
Was there no place for me to contribute in the operation? If I could suggest something impossible to replace, something that only I could do—
It suddenly occurred to me. Apart from constructing lost weapons, there was currently one other thing only I could achieve.
"—No, Mitsuki, I believe there is value in bringing me along."
"Eh...?"
"You saw it, right? I created antigravitational matter during the battle against Hekatonkheir. In an emergency, this power might prove to be a useful trump card."
I did not know why I suddenly gained the ability to create antigravitational matter. Before "Green" Yggdrasil urged me to, I never even considered whether it was possible for me to do that kind of thing.
Although this type of uniqueness of unknown origin felt eerie, I was exploiting this fact on purpose right now.
"So, Mitsuki, let me join the Counter-Dragon Squad. When there's a need to adjust battle plans, it's better to have an extra option, right?"
Despite my arguments, Mitsuki still frowned and made a stern expression.
"I understand what you are trying to say, Nii-san, but unknown powers cannot count as an option. Currently, information regarding that ostensibly antigravitational matter is too lacking. And that is still because... Nii-san, you refuse to disclose."
Mitsuki's tone sounded sulking when she added the final sentence.
"It's not because I don't want to say anything, but I don't know anything about it."
"In that case, such a power cannot be relied on."
Mitsuki spoke in a strong tone of voice. She seemed to be getting stubborn, but Shinomiya-sensei intervened.
"Calm down, Mononobe Mitsuki. If information is lacking, how about gathering information as a next step? Besides, we intended to have him examined once he recovers."
"Examined?"

Hearing my doubtful tone, Shinomiya-sensei turned her head to face me.
"Yes, Mononobe Yuu. The higher-ups are very interested in how you successfully created antigravitational matter, hence they would like you to let us investigate and analyze that new substance."
After slightly thinking over what Shinomiya-sensei said, I asked her:
"If the outcome of the examination discovers that antigravitational matter is useful... Will you let me join the Counter-Dragon Squad?"
"We want to raise chances of success too, so even if it's 1%, as long as it seems useful, we will naturally allow you to join."
Hearing this, Mitsuki yelled at Shinomiya-sensei in a rare display.
"Shinomiya-sensei!"
"This is a logical decision. You will be the one suffering in regret if the operation fails because you refuse the best options on account of personal feelings."
Shinomiya-sensei persuaded Mitsuki in a calm tone of voice.
"……I understand."
After several seconds of silence, Mitsuki reluctantly nodded. Then she glared at me silently. But rather than angry, her expression seemed more like she was fearing something.

Part 4

The examination occurred that day after school, in a special training site underground.
Unlike the one normally used for special ability practicals, there were all sorts of devices on the walls, resembling measuring instruments. There was a large glass window near the ceiling with women in lab coats walking around on the other side. That was probably the monitoring room where they analyzed all sorts of data.
Shinomiya-sensei, Mitsuki and I were the only ones in the training site. None of the other classmates were present. Apparently, since all data gathered from this point onwards would be top secret, ordinary students were barred from entering.
To be honest, I had no confidence whether I could create antigravitational matter again. After all, I did not even know how to transmute it from dark matter. Neither could I simulate it in my mind.
Nevertheless, my worries proved to be unnecessary.
Because my dark matter would automatically metamorphosize as soon as I wanted to create antigravitational matter.
Thus, antigravitational matter would appear in my hand effortlessly.
My attempts had already reached double digits but I still had not failed even once.
"...Very well, Mononobe Yuu, start again from the beginning."
"Yes."
I followed Shinomiya-sensei's orders and generated dark matter in my right hand.
—Fictional armament, Siegfried.
Then maintaining its nature as dark matter, I simply altered its form into a large-caliber ornamental gun.
After many attempts, I found out something. Namely, compared to direction conversion from dark matter, it was easier to control minute transmutations through a fictional armament.
I looked ahead to see small red bricks, roughly 10 cm in size, scattered across the training site's white floor. This was to make the effects of antigravitational matter more visually distinct.
I aimed at the floor thirty or forty meters away and said quietly:
"Antigravity."

This was the name of Leviathan's ability. This was a suitable name for picturing the substance to be created.
I transmitted the image and pulled the trigger.
A bullet of dark matter shot out, turning into antigravitational matter at the spot where I had aimed. While white light shone, the surrounding red bricks floated up as though they were in water.
Although the wave of floating bricks flowed over here, they stopped just as they were about to reach my feet.
The white glow lasted for roughly ten seconds before vanishing. Then the floating bricks also fell to the floor again.
"Hmm... One shot's worth is enough to neutralize gravity within a radius of roughly thirty meters. The duration is approximately ten seconds. Considering that a full-powered shot can take effect in a radius of a hundred meters for thirty seconds, this figure could be considered reasonable."
Standing in the back, Shinomiya-sensei offered her opinion.
"For the second shot, try converting to antigravitational matter with a higher density."
"Yes."
I nodded. Aiming for the same spot as the first shot, I fired the bullet.
Immediately, white light brighter than before was shot out. The surrounding bricks flew away in a radial pattern.
"...By increasing the density, it will apparently produce a strong repulsive field. But both the range and duration of effect are less than one tenth of earlier."
Shinomiya-sensei's voice was heard from behind.
Siegfried could fire three bullets of dark matter at most. For the final shot, I created relatively low-density antigravitational matter. As expected, the range and duration increased, but the only effect was weight reduction to some extent.
Thus, after I tested all the possible modes I could think of, the examination finally ended.
"I'm at my limit..."
Transmuting dark matter strained the mind and tired the body.
Having created antigravitational matter persistently, I leaned against the wall in exhaustion and sat on the ground.
"Good work, Mononobe Yuu, thank you for your cooperation."
Shinomiya-sensei praised me during my state of fatigue. Her gaze fell upon the screen of a portal terminal.
"...So what's the conclusion about the Counter-Dragon Squad thing?"
I asked her while catching my breath.
"There's no need to make a hasty conclusion. Data analysis is not complete yet. But personally, I think there is no liability in taking you along, because the repulsive field can serve as a defense measure that does not depend on physical barriers."
Replying that to me, Shinomiya-sensei walked over to the monitoring room.

Left behind, I looked timidly at Mitsuki standing next to me. Whether during the examination or after I came over to her side, she had remained silent. It made me a bit afraid.
"...How lovely, Nii-san."
Perhaps noticing my gaze, she finally spoke. But whether her tone of voice or expression, both gave off an air of displeasure.
"Are you that against my participation in the operation?"
"If it's only as a precautionary measure for emergencies... I have no wish of bringing you in your injured state to a dangerous location just for the sake of such an ambiguous reason."
"I'm very glad you're worried about me, but I have to go no matter what. Personal feelings aside, there shouldn't be any drawback to have additional backup personnel."
I asserted but after hearing me say that, Mitsuki shook her head gravely.
"No, there is a drawback. Suppose the operation were to fail and develop into the worst-case scenario—There will be one more person dead. This situation is different from the time with Leviathan."
"...Compared to Leviathan, isn't Basilisk easier to defeat?"
Mitsuki's words filled me with doubt, so I asked.
Back when Leviathan was invading, Mitsuki mentioned that Leviathan was considered second only to 'Yellow' Hraesvelgr in how troublesome they were to handle. Then that meant Basilisk should be easier to handle than Leviathan, right?
"Indeed, Leviathan was a dragon that was extremely difficult to attack... Even to the point of impossibility. Compared to that, in terms of being able to devise an attack plan, Basilisk is much easier than Leviathan. But on the matter of risk during battle, the two cannot be compared."
"...Risk?"
I repeated like a parrot. Mitsuki nodded.
"Yes, Basilisk's red beams fly towards the target at light speed, which of course means it is impossible to evade after seeing it. Since a direct confrontation is equivalent to suicide, the risk is much higher when standing on the frontline, which is why I did not wish to take you along, seeing as you are irrelevant to the details of the operation..."
Mitsuki answered unhappily. Then lowering her head, she continued:
"If this operation fails, as long as you stay in Midgard, perhaps a new battle plan could be devised using antigravitational matter, so as to make a comeback. But if you came along with us, Nii-san, it would be a totally meaningless sacrifice if you got killed without doing anything."
"But it's possible that everyone gets saved because I'm there."
"True, but..."
Despite acknowledging my point, Mitsuki sounded quite disapproving in tone. Nevertheless, she did not argue further. She probably thought that a dispute about possibilities would lead nowhere.

—But that being said, I never knew that the operation this time was so dangerous.
Now I could understand why Mitsuki was so overly tense. Because her judgment could decide other people's survival, no wonder she was putting so much pressure on herself.
Precisely because of that... I must stay by her side after all.
But even if this topic continued, clearly it would only make the mood worse.
Hence, I tried to find a different topic of conversation. Perhaps thinking the same thing, Mitsuki secretly glanced at me sideways to see my reaction.
For siblings, this unnatural silence persisted quite a while on this rare occasion.
The awkward atmosphere was making me anxious, so I said half-heartedly:
"M-Mitsuki, why did I gain the ability to make antigravitational matter?"
"W-Who knows? If you do not know, Nii-san, I cannot possibly know either. However... Although I was quite surprised initially, it is possible that your situation might be the same as mine back then."
"Your situation back then?"
Not understanding what she meant, I asked.
Then another voice entered our conversation.
"—Meaning that you are not the first person to emulate a dragon's ability."
I took a closer look and discovered that the principal, Charlotte B. Lord, and her secretary, Mica Stuart, were also present.
The principal walked over, her long blonde hair fluttering lightly, and stopped next to my collapsed state. Still the same as always, she looked like a teenaged girl. She would definitely be mistaken for a student if she were to wear the uniform. But she was undoubtedly Midgard's chief administrator.
Mica-san was dressed as a maid as usual while the principal had a lab coat over casual clothing.
"...Principal, were you watching while I was being examined?"
The principal nodded at my question.
"Yeah, in the monitoring room. Say, how much longer are you going to lie there? Do you really want to see my underwear that much?"
"Eh? N-No, sorry..."
I frantically stood up. Although the principal's lab coat had a long hem, the skirt underneath was especially short. From my position, her underwear was almost visible.
"I apologize for my brother's indiscretion."
Mitsuki glared at me coldly before bowing her head to apologize to the principal.
"It's fine, don't let it bother you. Because I can understand the feelings of finding girls' underwear attractive."
"...Huh?"
Seeing Mitsuki's shocked expression, the principal deliberately.
"Cough, nothing much, I accidentally spoke from the heart, that's all."

"…Principal, no second chances."
Mica-san's smile felt extraordinarily scary. Cold sweat appeared on the principal's forehead as she turned her gaze to me.
"B-Back to the main topic. Judging from the situation just now, you evidently have no idea what was the impetus that allowed Ds to create mithril or antimatter, right?"
"Impetus… Huh? I definitely never heard about it."
I only knew that these two substances were considered ultimate offense and defense.
"Speaking of which, neither mithril nor antimatter could be created by anyone in the beginning. But after the battle against the dragon capable of manipulating those two substances—'Purple' Kraken—someone capable of emulating the antimatter projectile appeared about the Ds."
"Isn't that…"
I looked at Mitsuki.
"Indeed, it was your sister. An after the Kraken was vanquished, Ds capable of transmuting mithril successfully appeared one after another."
"Is that true, Mitsuki?"
I asked Mitsuki for confirmation. Perhaps because the subject brought up the Kraken battle, Mitsuki's expression was a bit dark.
"Yes, it is true. Without conscious intent, I successfully emulated the Kraken's antimatter projectile."
Mitsuki answered but it seemed like she could offer no further explanation to that.
I finally understood what she meant by "the same." The situation was the same for Mitsuki and me, who suddenly became able to create antigravitational matter.
Seeing me taken back by surprise, the principal continued to explain.
"In other words, the reason why you are able to create antigravitational matter, the key trigger could very well be the battle against Leviathan, or related to its defeat. But why this happens, the most fundamental reason still eludes understanding, that's all."
The principal smiled wryly and made a slight shrug.
"Uh, but that's the key…"
"Don't put it that way. Just knowing that there's precedent should be enough to reassure you, right? Now, you'll neither feel arrogant for being special nor need to fear that you're heretical."
"Well, that's true."
After nodding to concur, I suddenly thought—
Did the principal come here for the purpose of encouraging me?
"Although you had to undergo careful examination, with this, you won't need to be treated as a lab rat from now on. But just like your sister, you might need to shoulder a little more responsibility."
The principal's blue eyes stared at me while she smiled suggestively.

"I'm actually getting what I want if this allows me to help Mitsuki or friends in need."
"...An excellent mindset. Then do your best."
Nodding with satisfaction, the principal turned around.
"Let's get going, Mica."
"Yes."
The two of them started making their way to the elevator, but along the way, the principal looked back.
"Ahhh, I just remembered. By the way, all Ds could be considered humans who had stolen Vritra's ability. Fufu, if you look at it from those dragons' perspective, humans are actually the robbers who are stealing their special rights successively, striking fear into their hearts."
The principal smiled happily.
"So there's no need for you to hold back. If Basilisk has any ability to steal, go ahead and steal it. Because you are the dragons' hunters, not their prey."
After encouraging us in this manner, the principal departed with Mica-san for real. Her powerful presence did not match her petite stature. Ultimately, the title of Midgard's chief administrator was not just for show.
"...Who is she actually? Mitsuki, do you know anything about her?"
Watching the principal's back, I asked Mitsuki.
"No, I have no idea either, but I have heard rumors... It was all thanks to her that Midgard was able to gain independence to become an autonomous educational institute, thus rapidly expanding its influence over the world."
"The mystery deepens... And her age is unknown."
"This is only hearsay, but reportedly, she has been on this island ever since the inception of Midgard..."
Hearing Mitsuki say that, I could not help but show a stiff expression.
"Y-You're kidding, right? Because wouldn't that make her—"
I almost blurted out the age I guessed but hastily swallowed my words. Because I felt an inexplicable chill run along my spine, similar to when I sensed life threatening danger on the battlefield. Clearly the principal could not hear our conversation, but my instincts rejected such a notion.
"...No, we'd better not pry unnecessarily."
In the end, for the sake of self-preservation, I deliberately said those words.

Part 5

Two days after I was examined, the participants in the operation were officially announced.
A total of twenty, of which eight were students from Brynhildr Class.
Luckily, my name was included.
Considering the scale of the operation, this headcount was smaller than I had imagined. This was probably the result of trying to minimize risk to prevent the worst-case scenario.
On the day it was announced, we were briefed officially and informed of the planned itinerary.
To lure Basilisk, Brynhildr Class was apparently heading first to the uninhabited island.
Then the next day, after rushed preparations, we were already on the ship.
"Mononobe, look, Midgard became so small!"
Pointing at the island in the distance, Iris spoke excitedly.
"...Viewing that island from outside, the feeling is quite strange."
I could not help but feel poignantly how small our world was as Ds.
The sky and the sea stretched limitlessly. The tiny island floating alone between the sky and the sea was Midgard where we had been staying just earlier.
The students of Brynhildr Class boarded the ship today and set sail for the uninhabited island where Basilisk was to be lured. This ship was a transport ship that Midgard used to move supplies and did not have any weaponry.
A request to NIFL could probably get them to lend us a much faster battleship, but that would give them an excuse to interfere in our operation.
As the commander of this operation, Shinomiya-sensei seemed quite wary of NIFL's interference.
Due to NIFL sending a team to infiltrate Midgard during Leviathan's invasion, a vast gulf had apparently arose between the two sides. Although I felt uneasy about how the two sides could not cooperate, at least it was better than them trying to get in each other's way.
—I hoped this would not develop into a conflict between humans.
While staring out blankly towards Midgard as it gradually disappeared over the horizon, I thought to myself. Compared to dragons, I was more adept at fighting humans, but I did not like to do that.
"Oh, Mononobe! Isn't that a dolphin?"

Rocking my shoulder, Iris pointed diagonally behind the ship. There was a school of dolphins swimming as though they were chasing the ship. Slicing through the water surface with their dorsal fins, they sometimes jumped skillfully using their speed, tracing out beautiful curves.
But compared to dolphins, the side view of Iris' elated face attracted my eyes more.
"...Is there something stuck to my face?"
Noticing my gaze, Iris cocked her head and asked in puzzlement.
"Oh, no—I was just thinking you seem quite happy."
"Yes, I'm very happy! It feels like all of us are going on a trip together, I'm so excited!"
Iris replied, smiling happily as though she believed that from the bottom of her heart.
But... I knew, I had heard Iris say so herself in the past.
Iris had apparently encountered a dragon disaster while on a ship journey with her family. Due to Leviathan passing by, the passenger ship was sunk, killing Iris' family.
"...You aren't forcing yourself, are you?"
Because of that, I was quite concerned and asked her.
"Forcing? Oh—Mononobe, don't tell me you're worried about me because we're traveling on a ship?"
"Well... I am, a bit."
I scratched my cheek and nodded to admit it but Iris beamed happily.
"Thank you, Mononobe. But it doesn't bother me at all, because in the end, a lot of happy thing happened on the family trip... Those are very precious memories to me... That's why, even though the ending is so sad, it didn't make me hate ship journeys."
I was stunned to hear her talking so matter-of-factly.
Normally speaking, it would not be surprising to develop mental trauma towards ship travel because of this, but Iris called it her precious memories very calmly.
"You're always full of surprises, Iris."
I smiled wryly and said to her. Iris had a careless personality, often made mistakes and used to lament how weak she was, but I considered her true character to have far more inner strength than me.
"Hmmhmm, because I'm not a girl who can be judged by common sense."
Iris proudly puffed out her chest.
"Yeah, like making everything explode no matter what you're transmuting. That's really far too mysterious."
"W-What's wrong with that!? Even if it's still a mystery, at least we've found a way to make use of it, that's why I'm able to join the Counter-Dragon Squad like this!"
"Yeah, but—One day eventually, I will unravel that mystery, because I'd like to know you better, Iris."

Only after saying this without thinking did I realize in alarm that it almost sounded like I was courting her.
Despite showing a surprised look initially, Iris' face gradually grew red.
"U-Umm, m-me too..."
As though trying to muster courage, Iris stared into my eyes.
Her cherry lips kept trembling while she continued in a hoarse voice:
"...If it's you, Mononobe, umm... I want you to know me better too."
Towards the end, her voice was as quiet as a whisper.
"What—"
This unexpected development halted my thoughts. I did not know how to continue.
Seeing my entire body freeze Iris tilted her head somewhat uneasily.
"Mononobe...? Don't tell me you didn't hear... me?"
"N-No, I heard you..."
Hearing me answer, Iris breathed a sigh of relief.
"Then, uh... Can I tell you now?"
Iris asked me softly in a stammer.
"T-Tell me what...?"
"Basically... Many things. As long as it's something you want to know, Mononobe, anything at all."
Very shyly, Iris answered while fidgeting.
"By saying it could be anything at all, you're actually making it harder for me..."
I scratched my head and replied. Iris looked up at me and asked hesitantly:
"If you can't think of something on the spot, then... Wanna visit my cabin? This isn't a place to talk secrets anyway..."
Making such a suggestion with blushing cheeks, Iris looked incredibly attractive, forcing me to gulp.
"Well, Iris, if you're okay with it—"
Dizzy from the mood, I was almost about to agree when I heard rapid footsteps approaching. I hastily stopped talking.
"Yuu! Tia took a tour of the deck and came back!"
I took a closer look to see Tia running here, out of breath. She had been very excited ever since she boarded the transport ship, running all over the place the whole time.
Although she should have been transported by ship when she first came to Midgard, she most likely did not have the freedom to tour around at the time.
"Yuu, let's explore the inside of the ship next?"
"Hold on, Tia. Iris and I are currently—"
With Tia pulling my right hand, I asked Iris "What now?" with a gaze.
"Oh, it's okay, go explore with Tia. The thing with me... Umm, it doesn't have to be right now."
Iris shyly saw me and Tia off. What she meant by that was asking me to come find her at her cabin later. Since inappropriate interaction between

the genders was prohibited, I was definitely not going to do anything bad, but even so, I still felt my heart rate rising.
"Yuu, let's go this way to have a look!"
Tia held my right hand tightly and walked rapidly. The deck of the transport ship was very spacious. Several cranes were installed for moving shipping containers.
There was a female member of the crew operating the cranes nearby. Most likely just like the staff at Midgard, the crew of this ship were also all female.
Entering the ship and advancing along the corridor, we came to a spacious lounge. This seemed to be a leisure space for the crew. There were vending machines along the wall along with a self-served cafeteria, although it was currently closed.
In a corner of the lounge, I saw classmates sprawled on a table.
They were Firill and Ren.
Firill had a paperback in one hand while her entire body was limp. On the other hand, Ren had a hand on her laptop while her body kept trembling.
"W-What's with you two!?"
Surprised, Tia ran towards them.
Firill's body shook then she turned her pallid face towards us.
"...I feel terrible."
Then she described her condition while in suffering.
"...Mm."
Ren also looked up unsteadily, nodding once to concur, then sprawled on the table again.
"Yuu, oh no! They're both sick!"
Tia frantically tugged my sleeve, so I worriedly inquired of them.
"Hey, what the heck's going on? You two were fine earlier when you boarded the ship, weren't you?"
Firill and Ren turned their pale faces towards me.
"I was reading a book when the world started spinning before my eyes..."
"Mm..."
Firill pointed at the paperback in her hand while Ren pointed at her laptop.
With that, I figured out the situation. To put Tia at ease, I placed my hand on her head.
"Don't worry, Tia. They're just seasick."
"Seasick?"
"Yeah, because it's different on a ship. Unlike land, it's always in a rocking state. Some people feel unwell because of that."
After explaining to Tia, I looked at Firill and Ren in exasperation.
"—Say, this is also because you two started reading a book and using the computer despite being unused to ships, you know?"
It was easy to get seasick when doing those things to begin with. That was really obvious, so they were reaping what they sowed.
"But... I really want to read, the culprit will be exposed in just a bit..."

Firill seemed to be reading a mystery novel. Despite her pallid demeanor, she still insisted on reading further.
"Doing that will only make the seasick symptoms worse. Sheesh... I'm confiscating this book for now."
Exasperated, I could only take away the book from Firill's hand.
"Ah!? G-Give it back..."
"I'll return it as soon as your seasick symptoms get better. At this rate, you won't even be able to eat your meals. You'll get sick for real."
"Ooh... I never knew you're this kind of person..."
She glared resentfully at me. Although I felt guilty to some extent, I must not give the book back to Firill in her current state.
Seeing this, Ren hid her laptop underneath her body while watching me with wary eyes.
"Mm!"
Ren waved her hand to shoo me away, but like Firill, her face was pale.
"No, I'm not planning to forcibly confiscate your computer as well, Ren. As long as you rest in your cabin and don't strain to use the computer, I won't do anything."
"...Mm."
Hearing me say that, Ren seemed reassured, nodding frequently.
"Really? You're a good kid, Ren. Are you able to return to your cabin on your own?"
I breathed a sigh of relief and petted Ren's head.
"Mm..."
Despite pouting with displeasure, Ren nodded lightly in acknowledgement.
"Then you two should rest properly."
"Once you get well, play with Tia again!"
Tia and I said goodbye to Firill and Ren then continued our exploration of the ship's interior.
We randomly turned a corner then advanced deeper, but encountered a flight of stairs.
Going down a level would take us to a series of cabins where we were staying. I had gone down to have a look once when moving luggage onto the ship. Perhaps designed with the expectation that VIPs might travel on it, even though it was not a passenger ship, the cabins assigned to us were still quite comfortable. The girls' cabins were near the prow side, while mine was in a corner towards the aft. Despite being on the same level, they were quite far apart.
One more level down should be the storage and engine rooms.
As for going up, I had not tried it yet, but ascending the stairs would probably get us to the bridge.
"Which way do we go?"
Hearing me ask that, Tia thought for a while then pointed up.
"Up is better."
"Got it."

Although we might not be allowed into the bridge, I still accompanied Tia on her adventure, to go everywhere as long as it was open to us.
Tia and I followed the metal staircase that was painted white. Immediately, we heard faint sounds of voices coming from above. With every step we took, the voices grew louder.
Although the words could not be heard, judging from the tone, it seemed to be some kind of dispute, and they were familiar voices.
"...Lisa and Mitsuki's voices."
Tia pulled my hand and quickened her pace. Thinking something had happened, I ran up the stairs too.
After going up two levels, I could heard the voices clearly. Reading the sign located at the landing, this was a level used for a conference room and other purposes.
"—And that is why I still cannot forgive you even now!"
"It matters not to me that you cannot forgive me, because what I had done was unforgivable!"
Lisa and Mitsuki's voices were coming from around the corner. I could also see Ariella hiding in the corner, peering at the situation in the corridor.
Ariella showed a troubled expression immediately after discovering us.
"Oh, it's you guys? Uh, just as you can hear, Mitsuki and Lisa are occupied right now. You'd better come back later if you need to find them for something."
"Lisa and Mitsuki are fighting? You're not stopping them?"
Tia asked Ariella in a slightly accusatory tone.
"I'd like to stop them but it doesn't seem like a problem I can just butt in."
Ariella sighed and shrugged, looking very helpless.
Tia and I did not know what had happened between them, so we listened carefully to the arguing voices.
"—Mitsuki-san, are you insisting that you will shoulder everything alone, be it the crime of killing Miyako-san or the responsibility of atoning for that?"
"Of course that is what I believe. I have no wish to push my responsibilities on others!"
"Hmph, what pretty sounding words. But no one will understand you and no one will follow you so long as you continue to monopolize that kind of resolve. Aren't there many things that you ought to confront bravely?"
"I-I am confronting bravely—"
"Do not say such words lightly when you clearly have not tried to obtain my forgiveness!"
"!"
Lisa's shout caused Mitsuki to swallow the remainder of what she was going to say.
I peered discreetly around the corner. Lisa had her arms crossed before her chest, standing with her feet apart. On the other hand, Mitsuki was in front of her, head lowered, shoulders shaking nonstop.
"Lisa... is very angry."

Similarly poking her head out, Tia under me remarked quietly.
Just as Tia described, Lisa was exuding anger that I had never seen before. Although I had incurred Lisa's wrath many times before, no occasion could compare to how angry Lisa was right now.
The dispute seemed to have started because of the subject of Shinomiya Miyako. This I can understand why Ariella could not interrupt. Because someone trying to intervene without knowing the details would only make matters worse.
I did not know much either.
Mitsuki had personally killed her dragonified best friend Shinomiya Miyako whereas Lisa still could not forgive this act. Lisa had also said before that she still could not approve even though she knew it was unavoidable.

"Mitsuki-san, could you say something?"
Lisa asked the silent Mitsuki.
"……!"
But Mitsuki turned around to leave as though fleeing, unable to say a single word in return.
Seeing Mitsuki coming towards us, we frantically leaned our backs against the wall. Luckily, Mitsuki walked past us to the other end of the corridor without noticing us. Noticing that she seemed to be crying, I wondered whether I should chase after her or not.
"The people over there, how much longer are you going to hide?"
But just as I was hesitating, I heard Lisa yelled in our direction. Although Mitsuki had not noticed us, Lisa had discovered us out of the corner of her eye.
"Sorry, I originally did not mean to eavesdrop..."
Ariella walked out apologetically. Tia and I followed.
"Sorry, it was because I heard voices."
"Because Tia heard angry voices, Tia was very worried..."
Seeing me and Tia apologize, Lisa sighed.
"Sigh, more eavesdroppers come out, one after another... Never mind, it's fine even if you overheard. Since we chose to converse in the corridor, I am in no position to blame you for eavesdropping.
Lisa spoke wearily then gazed in the direction where Mitsuki had fled.
"...However, if possible, I hope all of you will pretend you did not hear the earlier conversation. If you are worrying about Mitsuki-san, there is no need. Because once the evening meeting starts, she will appear as though nothing had happened, as usual like every other time..."
Hearing Lisa's bitter tone of voice, I asked her:
"As usual like every other time... Do you fight like this often?"
"Occasionally. The last time I argued with her was when Leviathan approached. We got into a dispute over interception matters and it developed into a fight like just now. The same goes for this time, it was originally just a discussion on future plans..."
I heard lisa saying "why did it end up like this?" quietly followed by a deep sigh.
"That's—"
On reflex, I wanted to say "because you still refuse to forgive Mitsuki, Lisa" but stopped myself. Because even if I accused Lisa, it would only make things more complicated. I noticed that Mitsuki's tears seemed to have made me lose my cool.
"...If you have something to say, I hope you can finish what you started out to say. Nevertheless, I can probably imagine the gist of it."
After speaking harshly to me like that, Lisa walked past us and went up the stairs.
In the end, I watched Lisa leave without being able to say a single word.
After Lisa was out of sight, Ariella relaxed her shoulders and said:

"Even though it's just the beginning, it feels like there are tough times ahead. Although given their personalities, they're still going to perform their duties properly... But it still doesn't feel reassuring."
Tia also concurred with a worried face.
"Yeah... It's not good to keep fighting. Tia wishes they could make up."
"...That's right."
As much as I agreed with Tia, I also understood that it was no easy task.
This problem was quite deep-rooted, because Mitsuki and Lisa's dispute had persisted all the way from two years ago ever since Shinomiya Miyako's passing.
It looked like I should not go chasing after Mitsuki either. If I made things worse, it might make prevent Mitsuki from even feigning "things as normal."
But I did not think that maintaining the status quo was the right answer either.
—I really want to find a way to mediate this.
In any case, I should try finding a solution.
Because if those two could reconcile, perhaps it could also eliminate Mitsuki's insecurities.

Chapter 2 - Frontline on Distant Waters

Part 1

The dragon cult, the Sons of Muspell, worshiped dragons as gods, obstructed NIFL's activities and its members were wanted internationally as terrorists. Even so, their influence continued to grow instead of waning. That was probably due to how frightening dragons were. To escape their fear of dragons, people chose to worship even though it would not change reality the slightest.

To them, humans possessing the power of dragons—the Ds—were also targets of worship. Nevertheless, without a special reason, no D would want to stay in a terrorist organization.

And the girl who had that special reason—Kili Surtr Muspelheim—was active as the leader of the Sons of Muspell.

Currently, Kili was lurking in a room in a hotel that was colluding with the organization. Inside the hotel room, she was in the bathroom that was filled with white steam.

Soaking her body in the bathtub filled with hot water, Kili examined the information she had gathered while infiltrating Midgard. In her hand was a waterproof computer terminal with Midgard's classified information shown on the screen.

"Oh... The only person capable of creating antimatter is Mononobe Mitsuki huh... In other words, she inherited Code Sechs, the sixth authority."

Reading the student's personal data, Kili murmured with delight.

"Legally his younger sister... Speaking of which, I seem to recall seeing her three years ago too... Coincidence is truly uncanny."

Kili's murmurings echoed in the bathroom. That being said, Kili did not consider herself to be talking to herself. She knew that she was always under "her" surveillance.

Being "her" eyes and ears to gather information, acting as "her" limbs to carry out "her" will, this was Kili's job. Also—this was the purpose of her creation.

"Eh... But I remember that it was Monobe Mitsuki who used antimatter projectile to slay the Kraken. If that's the case, it's weird... It doesn't make sense. *She had to have defeated the Kraken first in order to create antimatter*... So what actually happened?"

Kili frowned and searched through other information.

"Although there are exceptions... Mononobe Mitsuki does not meet the criteria. Speaking of matching... Oh right, if it's her... And there were two Krakens... The answer to the paradox is most likely that."
Muttering emphatically, Kili searched the information. Finally, she threw her head back and looked at the ceiling as though surrendering.
"Ah—Jeez, the report should have recorded correct information in detail! Now it means I can't corroborate the answer!"
Kili splashed the bathwater with her feet in displeasure. Then she closed the data file displayed on the screen.
"—Whatever, what's important is the future, not the past."
Then Kili opened the students' personal data again and called up the portrait of the only male student, Mononobe Yuu.
"Yuu... Surely you are different from me and the other Ds, although mother simply thinks of you as an error. However, I believe you are Neun, the ninth."
As though praying, Kili stared at Mononobe Yuu's face like she was anticipating minor hope.
"You must prove yourself to be superior to Basilisk in caliber—My prince."
Kili murmured quietly then kissed Yuu's face on the screen.
Staring at him, Kili's eyes showed signs of hidden madness.

Part 2

Lisa's prediction turned out to be correct.
When evening came, a meeting was called in the ship. I entered the meeting room to see Mitsuki there as her usual self.
Passing out documents deftly, she explained the contents and did not look like she had been in an argument just now. Although there was some degree of unnaturalness when talking to Lisa, it was not something noticeable unless you were paying attention.
The meeting was about future plans.
After reaching the uninhabited island where the battle was set to take place, this ship would remain as the living quarters and base of operations.
Lessons were apparently going to continue as normal. Mitsuki gave detail explanations and gave us our timetables.
Mitsuki's performance was too perfect, which was exactly why I felt especially unsettled. What worried me was: how far did Mitsuki strain herself for the sake of sustaining such perfection?
Whether during the meeting or dinner afterwards, I spent the whole time thinking about Mitsuki's issue. In the end, I returned to my cabin without taking any action.
My cabin was apparently provided for guests and meant for two people originally. There were two beds and it felt especially spacious for one person to live in. Back in my NIFL days, the battleships I traveled on basically had four people squeezed in a room. Showers also had to be taken in communal bathrooms but this cabin was even equipped with a personal bathroom.
Struck by how massive a difference in treatment there was between a D and a common soldier, I took a shower, washing away a day's worth of sweat.
The surface of my left shoulder's wound had already closed up, so there were no problems as long as I washed gently. The bandage was for keeping the shoulder in position while the inside continued to heal. After the shower, I tied the bandage again then lay down on bed.
"Sigh... What should I do?"
Because Mitsuki was showing no openings, I wondered if I should try asking Lisa for information, but that would probably be difficult too.
In any case, I had to collect enough information to mediate their dispute.
Just as I started thinking whether there was someone else who might know about what took place in the past—there was knocking at my cabin door.

—Who would come at this hour?
Speaking of which, I just remembered Iris' invitation to her cabin. Maybe she came over to get me? Since I had not prepared myself yet, my feelings were quite frantic.
No, the visitor could be Tia, because Lisa was the one who looked after Tia ever since I was hospitalized and they were also rooming in the same cabin, but Tia said wistfully during dinner that she wanted to sleep in the same room as me if possible.
With nervous feelings, I cautiously opened the door but the person there was completely unexpected.
"Firill?
I called the name of the girl who was standing before the door in displeasure.
Firill had probably taken a shower just now. She had changed from her uniform into aqua-blue pajamas, making her body's curves more obvious than usual. Her bust also looked especially large. Perhaps because her bust size made her pajamas uncomfortable, the top two buttons were unfastened, exposing her cleavage slightly.
—Isn't she acting a bit too uninhibited?
Perhaps because Midgard was totally an all-girls school before I transferred in, they lacked awareness in that area... But it really gave me a hard time controlling my gaze.
Just as my heart raced, Firill extended her hand slowly towards me.
"...Hand."
Firill's curt statement seemed to be urging me to do something while her entire body gave off displeased vibes.
"Hand? You want to shake hands?"
Firill's voice was too quiet and I could not hear clearly, so I tried shaking hands with her first. It was a slender little hand.
However, Firill scowled and shook off my hand.
"...Wrong, hand it over."
Firill shook her hand and said.
"Hand it over...? Oh—"
Then I finally remembered that I had forcibly confiscated Firill's mystery novel to help her recover from her seasickness.
"Sorry, I accidentally forgot. But are your seasick symptoms better?"
"...Yes, I also had excellent appetite during dinner. Didn't you see?"
"Oh... I was distracted by something else."
While feeling apologetic, I scratched my head at the same time. Then Firill grabbed my right hand and pressed it against her stomach. Through the fabric, I could feel the suppleness and warmth of her skin, it made my heart beat like crazy.
"...How's that? Can you feel that I'm very full?"
"H-Hey!?"

Firill controlled my hand to touch her stomach. It did feel slightly taut, but I was in no mood to care about that. I was strongly conscious of the tender skin of a girl's, beneath the pajamas' soft fabric.
"...Your face is red, what's the matter?"
"Do you need to ask? If you suddenly do this, of course I'll..."
Firill's body warmth, felt through my palm, was making me unable to hide the my shaken emotions.
"...Oh, so boys will blush and get flustered because of this."
Firill blinked while observing my reactions in interest.
"S-Stop making fun of me. I'll return your book."
Hearing me say that, Firill instantly released my hand.
"Great, return it, instantly, hurry."
She evidently wanted to continue reading the story quite a lot. Making a fist in front of her chest, Firill hurried me.
"Okay okay, I'm getting it now."
So I turned my back to Firill and walked deeper into my cabin. But just as I picked up the paperback on the table, I suddenly felt like playing a prank on her.
It would be uncool if she played a joke on me and I did not retaliate, so I decided to make her panic a bit.
Hence, without thinking, I returned the paperback to Firill then said:
"By the way, about the novel's culprit..."
"NO!!"
However, Firill reacted beyond my expectation. Charging at me fiercely she covered my mouth with both hands. Pushed back by Firill's force, I lost balance and fell on a bed.
"Don't say it! Absolutely not!"
Leaning her weight on me, Firill glared at me with tears in her eyes.
Even if I wanted to explain it was just a joke, I could not say a single word because she had my mouth covered.
"Mmm—! Mmmmmmmmm!"
Without a choice, I could only make muffled noises. Worse of all, even my nose was covered by her hands, preventing me from breathing. At this rate, I was going to suffocate.
Seeing the color of my face start to change, Firill relaxed her hands slightly and asked me:
"...Promise me you won't say it out, okay?"
Hearing Firill ask me that, I nodded as hard as I could.
"Mmmm!"
"Then I'll release you."
"Puha!?"
Liberated, I took a deep breath then apologized to Firill.
"S-Sorry... Actually, I didn't read the book at all so I don't know who the culprit is either."
"...You deceived me? How malicious."

Firill pouted and glared at me. She was very close to me, almost to the point where we could feel each other's breath.
Pinning me down, Firill's body felt hot while her bosom pressed against me felt very soft.
"I'm terribly sorry, I-I'll apologize to you… Umm, could you please back off?"
Because this posture was too stimulating, I urged Firill to get away from me but she stared at my face and shook her head to refuse.
"...No, I won't back off until you compensate me."
"C-Compensate… What do you want me to do?"
"You don't need to do anything, just lie there quietly and don't move."
Saying that, Firill lifted up my shirt.
"W-What are you doing—"
"...Given this rare chance, I'll have a look at a boy's body."
Firill started to touch my upper body. Feeling someone else's fingertips moving along my skin, I could not help but squirm.
"Hey, it really tickles!"
"Don't move. This is research."
"R-Research?"
Enduring the feeling of my body getting fondled, I asked her.
"...One day, I'd like to write my own book, but that requires lots of knowledge… Hence, this is research for writing a book."
While explaining, Firill moved her slender fingers over my body. Although it felt ticklish, there were other additional sensations. Experiencing such a feeling surging for the first time, my back shuddered.
"Guh..."
"Oh… Is your heart rate rising again?"
Firill put her hand on my left chest, asking with her head cocked.
"T-That's—"
"Don't fall for me, okay?"
With a serious expression, Firill stared at me in my flustered state then she continued:
"Do not fall for me unless you have the resolve to be a prince."
A prince? Since Firill was always reading books, was she the type of girl hoping for her own Prince Charming to appear?
Although this question crossed my mind, now was not the time to pursue such a matter.
"In that case, stop doing this. Even someone like me would start falling to temptation, you know?"
"...Then it would be a nuisance. Very well, I'm almost about to forgive you."
With a helpless look, Firill stopped her hands.
"Sigh… That felt like a close call just now..."
Feeling exceptionally exhausted, my body was limp and powerless. With me like that, Firill was looking at me incredulously.
"...Even if you're not in love with the other person, your heart will still race like that?"

"Well, if a girl as cute as you touched their body, I'm sure every man would feel their heart racing."
"Wow, you're hitting on me now."
Hearing what I said, Firill brought her hand over her lips in surprise.
"I-I'm not hitting on you! I'm just stating the truth, meaning that I'm asking you to take more care—"
I frantically explained but Firill interrupted me and said:
"In my view, if you're going to hit on someone, I hope you could pursue Lisa."
"Why are you bringing up Lisa now?"
I answered with a question because I could not understand how the subject came to this.
"Because Lisa acts so cute whenever you're hitting on her."
"W-When did I ever hit on Lisa?"
"...No self-awareness?"
With an exasperated expression, Firill looked down at me.
Even after hearing what she said, I still had no recollection of ever hitting on Lisa. But speaking of Lisa, I remembered how she and Mitsuki had an argument today.
Come to think of it, Firill's student number was 2 and judging from Tia and my cases, student numbers were assigned in the order the student joined the class. If Firill had arrived even earlier than Mitsuki, who was Student No. 3, then she might very well know clearly about what had happened two years ago.
"I think you're probably mistaken, Firill, but anyway, can I ask you some questions... about Lisa?"
"...Why are you asking all of a sudden? Research to help you pursue her?"
"No, I'm being serious here. Firill, you've known Lisa for a long time, right?"
"...Yeah, we enrolled at the same time. Also, we already met before coming to Midgard."
"Eh!? You were friends to begin with?"
Thinking what a great coincidence, I asked her to confirm.
"...Only as casual acquaintances in high society."
"H-High society? What kind of lives did you two lead before?"
I could not help but blurt that out, slightly shrinking away.
"...A very boring and troublesome life, it's not that great."
"R-Really..."
Whether Firill or Lisa, both of them seemed to come from a world completely different from mine. Although I was curious about their backgrounds, Firill did not seem quite happy to talk about the past, so I did not pry further. After all, the matter between Lisa and Mitsuki was the main topic.
"Lisa and I truly became friends after arriving in Midgard. So... What would you like to know?"

"Y-Yeah, many things... But what I want to know most is: how can I get Lisa to forgive Mitsuki?"
Hearing me say that, Firill's expression tensed while she stared at me with candid eyes, as though trying to deduce my true intentions.
"...You want Lisa and Mitsuki to reconcile?"
"If possible, that's what I want to do. Do you think I'm meddling too much?"
Perhaps she might be offended by a third party like me butting in. Prepared for this possibility, I asked Firill.
"...No, because I'd like to resolve the problem between them too. After all, it's too unproductive the way they are now."
"Unproductive?"
"Yes, they keep tormenting each other for absolutely *no reason at all*."
"There's a reason, right? About Shinomiya Miyako..."
I felt nervous to bring up this name but I still gazed into Firill's eyes and pointed this out.
However, Firill shook her head in disagreement with a sorrowful expression.
"Wrong. The moment you think that, you're mistaken."
Rejecting what I said, Firill revealed the truth in one sentence.
"Lisa does not hate Mitsuki at all."
"...!?"
Hearing her say that, I gasped.
Not hate? In other words, Lisa was—
"Mononobe-kun."
Firill called my name, this was probably... the first time. Prior to this, she always referred to me as either "you" or "him."
"W-What is it?"
I gulped and urged her to continue.
"I have slight expectations for you, so you have to do your best, because I can't think of *any better method* than Lisa."
"...I don't know if I'll be able to meet your expectations, but I'll do everything I can."
After Firill told me the truth, I had to take the matter even more seriously. Anyway, I came up with one thing I needed to do first.
"That's good enough. If you succeed... I will reward you."
Firill placed her hand lightly on my left chest and smiled at me. Because she was still on top of me, that action looked especially sexy and seductive.
"Reward... I hope it's nothing too shocking."
"That I cannot promise."
Firill's answer sounded ominous. Despite getting a bad feeling, I still found my heart rate rising as though looking forward to it.
"Then please show some mercy. By the way, it's time you got off me. If someone sees this, we'll both get seriously misunderstood."
"Yeah, you're right—Oh... Sorry, too late."

Firill was just about to change her posture when she looked at the entrance and stopped.
"Huh?"
Feeling a despairing premonition, I turned my gaze as well.
"What is going on here...? I demand an explanation from you two."
Outside the cabin's open door, dressed in uniform, Mitsuki was standing there with a twitching expression. She was holding a first aid kit in her hand, probably visiting me to check on my injuries.
"M-Mitsuki..."
I was lying on the bed with my shirt pulled up and Firill straddling me. How should I explain this kind of situation?
I was at a loss for words when Firill tearfully complained to Mitsuki.
"Let me tell you... Mononobe-kun is so bad. He refused to return this book to me."
Firill extracted the book from my hand and cradled it lovingly before her chest.
"Simply stated, this is completely Nii-san's fault, right?"
Mitsuki swept her icy gaze towards me. Hearing her ask that, Firill nodded with a serious expression.
"Yes, basically that. I only came to get my book back."
"Urgh..."
Since it was basically what she said, I could not retort.
"...Well then, that's that. I'm off."
Firill swiftly got down from me and walked to the cabin's entrance.
"H-Hey! At least help me explain a little!"
I frantically shouted at her but Firill made a thumbs-up sign.
"...Good luck."
She irresponsibly encouraged me then left the cabin. After seeing her off, Mitsuki entered and closed the door.
"Nii-san, you seem a bit too energetic. Perhaps I no longer need to treat you as one of the injured?"
Mitsuki's bone-chilling gaze pierced me while she approached. Putting down the first aid kit she was holding, she grabbed my ears and pulled forcefully to the sides.
"Hey, ouch, that really hurts! My ears are ripping off!?"
"Ears that do not listen properly to others must be lengthened. Seriously... I clearly warned you during the evening meeting just now..."
"Huh? You warned me about something?"
I could not remember so I asked directly.
"...So you really were not listening. What I said was that during this period before the battle, we will be living with closer proximity between the genders than usual, hence Nii-san, you need to be more disciplined than before to avoid doing anything against public morals!"
"Oh... Sorry, I think I missed it."

Because I had heard the same message many times already, I apparently failed to store it as new information. In addition, I was worrying about Mitsuki and Lisa's fight.
I had not connected my consciousness with Yggdrasil, so it could not be memory loss no matter what. This was probably just my own carelessness.
"Looks like you must be punished, Nii-san. How many repentance essays should you write?"
Mitsuki released my ears and started to ponder.
"W-Wait a sec! There was a reason for that just now!"
Since I was punished to write over a hundred repentance essays before, repentance essays had become my mental trauma. Hence, I desperately tried to explain how things developed to that situation.
"...Is that so? Because Firill-san was seasick... That does sound like something she would do, but are you really telling the truth?"
"It's the truth! Ask Firill to check if you don't believe me."
"Very well, I shall believe you, Nii-san, since you say so. You may be spared from the repentance essays, but—"
Saying that, Mitsuki flicked her middle finger against my forehead.
"Ow!"
Struck by her finger, I held my forehead against my right hand.
"...From what you told me, the whole reason why you were tangled in bed together is because of your own malice, is it not? Hence, I punished you with a finger flick. Any objections?"
"You're right, it was my fault."
"I sighed and accepted the gentle punishment.
"Sigh... What a worrying future with this already happening the first day. Judging from this situation, I cannot take my eyes off you for a single moment, Nii-san. I might not be able to sleep tonight..."
Mitsuki added "what a mistake to assign this cabin so far away" under her breath.
But after hearing her say that, I thought of something.
Oh right—about Lisa, I had something to say to Mitsuki and this was a great opportunity. When Firill said "good luck" just before she left, I think this was partially what she meant.
"Say, Mitsuki, since you're so worried about me—Why don't you sleep in this room tonight? After all, there are two beds."
"Eh!?"
Mitsuki's eyes widened as she cried out in surprise.
"Then you'll be able to sleep peacefully if I stay within your sight, right?"
"What... W-W-W-What are you talking about!? Unlike last time, Tia-san is not here, you know? J-Just us two?"
"...? We're siblings, it's okay, right?"
"No, Nii-san and I are..."

Mitsuki's gaze wandered indecisively. Perhaps she was worried that this would count as breaking public morals as the student council president, even if we were siblings.
Then I should tell her that I had my own reasons too.
"Actually—I've got things to talk about, Mitsuki."
"Things to talk about...?"
"Yes, important things."
I looked into Mitsuki's eyes while speaking. Immediately, Mitsuki blushed and lost composure.
"B-By important things, you mean..."
"Please, Mitsuki. I know you're very busy as the Counter-Dragon Squad captain... But even if it's just one night, please let me have your time."
"M-My time—!?"
Mitsuki repeated my words with her face all red then nodded lightly.
"—I-I understand. Then I shall p-prepare then come back."
Mitsuki finished in a hoarse voice and left the room unsteadily.
"G-Great, I'll be waiting."
Because Mitsuki seemed abnormally nervous, even my voice involuntarily went stiff too.
The room went quiet and the faint sounds of waves reached my ears.
Looking out my window at the blackened sea surface of the night, I waited for Mitsuki to return.
Firill's "good luck" kept echoing in my mind—

Part 3

After roughly half an hour, there was a knock at the door.
I opened the door to see Mitsuki standing there in pajamas, hugging a pillow. Her face was slightly red and her body was giving off a faint fragrance from after a bath.
"P-Pardon the intrusion."
Mitsuki greeted with rigid adherence to etiquette then entered the cabin. After surveying the interior, she chose the inner bed of the two to sit on.
"You went out of your way to bring your own pillow?"
I sat down on the edge of the outer bed, facing Mitsuki and asked her that.
"Y-Yes, well... I brought my own pillow from the dormitory, because I believe I will sleep better with this..."
Hugging her pillow, Mitsuki answered shyly.
"Your room got blasted by Kili not too long ago... So that pillow turned out okay."
In an attempt to retrieve Tia, Kili had infiltrated Midgard under the identity of Tachikawa Honoka recently and launched a surprise attack on Lisa and Tia who were staying at Mitsuki's dorm at the time. During that event, the majority of Mitsuki's room was destroyed and was still under repairs. For the time being, Mitsuki was using another room in the dorm.
"Since the blast mostly damaged the window's surroundings, even though the pillow was slightly blackened from smoke, its cleanliness could be restored after washing it."
"Really? That's great."
"...Indeed, quite."
The conversation broke off unnaturally. Perhaps affected by Mitsuki's nervous emotions, I find myself unable to find a subject to continue the conversation.
—Why did I feel so self-conscious?
I scratched my head and tried my hardest to regain composure. Unless the mood eased up a bit, it would be hard for me to get to the main point.
"Say..."
"Umm..."
Our voices overlapped. Mitsuki and I stared at each other for a moment then we both laughed at the same time.
"Haha, what are we doing? This isn't like us at all."
"Fufu, indeed."

"You go first, Mitsuki."
"—Very well, then I will take you up on that."
Mitsuki made a carefree smile and said to me:
"Nii-san, how is your wound?"
"The wound is healing fine. Although it still hurts, the surface has closed up."
I could already do a certain level of activity with my arm below the elbow.
Hence, I waved my left hand to show Mitsuki.
"Are you bandaging it properly. I suspect that the inside has yet to heal entirely. The wound could tear open if you are not careful, you know?"
"Yeah, I've bandaged it good. I did it myself after my shower."
"...How worrying. Allow me to check."
Mitsuki frowned and moved over to my side with her pillow.
"H-Hey."
Before I could stop her, Mitsuki had already pulled my collar open to examine the bandage on my shoulder.
"It is essentially bandaged properly."
"I won't have problems with small stuff like this. I already learned first aid at NIFL."
"...Without my knowledge, Nii-san, you have become someone capable of many things on your own."
Mitsuki's tone of voice sounded a bit sad.
"Well, the same applies to you to, Mitsuki. I never expected my introverted and shy little sister to become the student council president."
"Not at all... I am simply working my hardest at things within my power."
Mitsuki looked away. Rather than embarrassment, her expression seemed more like guilt.
I could also vaguely sense the shadow of Shinomiya Miyako here.
Perhaps Mitsuki viewed working as the student council president as a kind of atonement.
"Mitsuki—What were things like for you in the three years after coming to Midgard?"
"What were things... like?"
"Yeah, I'd like you to tell me... about your life after coming to Midgard."
When I made such a request, Mitsuki showed a troubled expression.
"Too many things happened, where should I start...? This is not something that can be finished in a single night."
"In that case—Oh right, I hope you can tell me about the girl who was your best friend, Mitsuki."
I made my decision and said to Mitsuki.
Mitsuki gasped and quietly started at my face. After ten-odd seconds of silence, Mitsuki asked in a calm tone of voice.
"...Is that what you meant by important things?"
"Well, one of them."
I nodded in admission while Mitsuki sighed deeply.

"Sigh... And to think I wondering what it was about. I see now. Nii-san, am I right in guessing that you heard my argument with Lisa-san?"
Hearing me suddenly bring up the matter of Shinomiya Miyako, the smart Mitsuki instantly guessed my motivation.
"I didn't mean to eavesdrop..."
"You need to mind your own business."
Mituski remarked with exasperation and glared coldly at me.
"Like you, Mitsuki, I'm just working my hardest at things within my power. But even if I want to intervene, I can't even stand on the same arena unless I understand Shinomiya Miyako as a person first. So... Can you tell me about her?"
I looked into Mitsuki's eyes and conveyed my wish to her directly.
"...Frankly speaking, I am reluctant to bring up this matter, because by this point, all of it has turned into painful memories."
"Really..."
Since I did not want to make Mitsuki suffer, I could only sigh helplessly. But seeing me disappointed, Mitsuki continued hesitantly:
"—B-But if you could agree to one demand from me, Nii-san... Perhaps I might be able to try hard to recount it."
"Really? I'm willing to do anything as long as it's my power."
I agreed without a second thought. Awkwardly, Mitsuki asked in a quiet voice:
"Then... May I hug you, Nii-san?"
"Hug?"
"...Yes, by hugging you, Nii-san, I think I will be able to muster my courage."
I did not expect this suggestion, but having said that I was willing to do anything, I could not falter. Besides, as siblings, there should not be any reason to feel concerned about this kind of thing. Although my heart rate was accelerating abnormally, I decided it would be fine.
"S-Sure."
I answered hoarsely. With her face bright red, Mitsuki said "T-Thank you" in a barely audible voice.
Inside the room, dimly lit by a light bulb, Mitsuki and I were lying on the same bed.
"...Nii-san."
Mitsuki called my name mournfully and hugged my right arm tightly. Through the pajamas, I could feel the warm and softness of her body covering my right arm.
I could feel the sensation of her petite but beautifull-shaped breasts on my upper arm. This meant that I could not move my right arm recklessly.
"I feel so calm now... This should be fine."
Leaning her cheek against my right shoulder, Mitsuki spoke with a smile. Her after-bath fragrance was caressing my nose lightly. In contrast to Mitsuki, I felt quite unsettled.
"Okay, can you tell me now?"

To prevent her from noticing my nervousness, I tried my hardest to stay calm while urging her to start.
"Very well... Let us begin with how we met. That day took place just when a strong typhoon was leaving. She arrived in Midgard two weeks after me."
Mitsuki closed her eyes and spoke nostalgically.
"My first impression of her, how should I describe it...? She was superior to me on all accounts. Of course, she was quite beautiful in face, but the light emanating from her inner character was blindingly bright to me. It made me feel that she lived up to her name as Haruka-san's younger sister."
"By Haruka-san, you mean Shinomiya-sensei?"
I confirmed with her and Mitsuki nodded with a chuckle.
"Yes, back then, Shinomiya-sensei was every student's idol! Perfectly flawless in all respects, she has always been my goal since back then."
"Wow, it's almost like the current you, Mitsuki."
"W-What are you talking about!? How could I compare to her!?"
On my end, this was not flattery, but Mitsuki still denied it with her face red.
She shifted her body slightly. I felt a definite sensation of softness from her bosom in contact with my arm.
"...I don't think it's entire out of the question."
While worrying whether my face was going red, I replied.
"Of course it is! Seriously, I am going back to the main subject! Simply stated, Miyako was very similar to Haruka-san, a very amazing girl."
Mitsuki spoke in embarrassment, but even if she claimed that Miyako was more amazing than her, I found it impossible to imagine.
"A girl like that—Because we were both Japanese and of similar age, she was assigned to be my roommate. In the beginning, I was very nervous but Miyako was a cheerful, lively and straightforward person, so we became great friends very quickly."
Mitsuki's voice carried nostalgia. It must have been a very happy time for her back then.
"However... She quickly surpassed me in both academics and the control of dark matter, which I found it a little hard to accept. Of course, since I arrived two weeks earlier than her, I had gone through a phase of hard work, but ultimately, she did everything better than me without exception. I was a bit jealous of her talent."
Smiling wryly, Mitsuki described her feelings from back then.
"Wow, was she that amazing? But from the it sounds, rather than best friends, wouldn't that normally make her your rival? Especially with your competitive personality, Mitsuki."
After hearing my response, Mitsuki glared at me unhappily.
"...I am not that competitive. However, I definitely felt a sense of rivalry against Miyako, but how should I put it...? Miyako felt strong affection towards me, even to the point of sweeping away my tiny hostility completely."

"Strong affection?"
"P-Please do not misunderstand, okay? I mean feelings as friends, nothing more. I have no idea what she saw in me, but it was as though we were joined at the hip... We even slept in the same bed like this at some point."
Although I doubted whether those were truly feelings of friendship, I held my tongue. Since I did not know Shinomiya Miyako directly, I had no right to judge her.
"Perhaps that could be described as Miyako's only flaw. She often made errors in judgment due to putting me above all else. That time, it was also for this reason that—"
Mitsuki bowed her head gravely after saying that.
"You mean... The time when 'Purple' Kraken attacked?"
"...Yes, it was just as my first anniversary at Midgard was approaching, a siren suddenly blared. We were informed that the Kraken was approaching."
Perhaps because she had reached a sad scene, Mitsuki hugged my arm even tighter. Pressing herself close to me, her body was warm and giving off a fragrance with faint sweetness.
"Now that I think back, the situation was not quite right on that day. She seemed a bit distracted and would suddenly focus her gaze where there was nothing to be seen. Most likely, her dragon mark had already changed color by that point. But because Miyako's dragon mark was on her back, she did not notice immediately..."
Mitsuki spoke regretfully. Back then, no one knew that there was a link between the dragon mark's change in color and a D's dragonification. However, had they discovered the symptoms earlier, perhaps a different future would have resulted. That was probably what Mitsuki thought.
"There were already plans back then to use the Ds' powers as trump cards for vanquishing dragons. And so, the Counter-Dragon Squad was established with Haruka-san as the captain. Miyako and I were part of it too, hence we head to the frontline... Falling into the Kraken's trap on our own."
Hearing what she said, I felt puzzled. Since the dragons' aims were unknown at the time, there should have been the option of escaping back then.
"Was the situation so urgent that it was necessary to send a newly established force to fight?"
"...The Kraken advanced with frightening speed. There was no time to evacuate Midgard completely. The fleet deployed by NIFL and Midgardsormr were all swept away by antimatter missiles and did not even manage to stall for time. To protect Midgard and our comrades, we had no choice but to fight."
There was a rich sense of reality in what Mitsuki said. Midgard must have been in chaos at the time. As one would expect, Mitsuki and her comrades must have went forward to fight the Kraken with resolve.

"But when the Kraken entered visual range, just as we were starting to attack, I noticed Miyako's dragon mark giving off a strong purple glow, clearly visible even through her clothing. Then with a shocked face, she said that the dragon's target was her."
"...Now that you mention it, back when Leviathan approached, Iris also felt its will."
I recalled what had happened roughly a month ago. Perhaps some kind of connection of that sort would form between the dragon and the selected D.
"Miyako tried her hardest to persuade us that the Kraken was pursuing her. Heating up, her dragon mark was summoning it and the rest of us had to hurry and run. However, at the time, we all thought that Miyako was speaking nonsense because she had lost her mind."
Mitsuki seemed deeply regretful and self-reprimanding. Closing her eyes, she leaned her forehead forcefully on my shoulder.
"...It couldn't be helped. I'd probably draw the same conclusion too."
"But... At least as her best friend, I should have believed in her without hesitation. But I failed to say anything at all. Just as we were perplexed, the situation had already gone beyond the point of no return, because the Kraken's tentacles had spread out in a dome shape, covering up the entire area."
Mitsuki's voice wavered slightly.
"After seeing the tentacles approaching to attack us, Miyako turned her gaze at me, then... She waved lightly before her chest then rushed out alone. She probably believed that at this rate, we were all going to be crushed to death by the tentacles."
Mitsuki spoke with her voice and body trembling.
"Miyako attacked the Kraken's purple eyeball while rushing at it, but her offensive was completely deflected by the tentacles of mithril. She had nowhere to run—Then after that..."
Mitsuki was finally at a loss for words.
"—Stop, thank you, it's already enough."
I could not bear to watch, so I asked her to stop. I already knew the gist of what happened next. The two Krakens, including the dragonified Shinomiya Miyako, were killed by Mitsuki with antimatter projectiles.
Shinomiya Miyako must have never suspected she would turn into a dragon. Otherwise, she would not have charged the Kraken on her own.
"Miyako really... always made errors of judgment at critical moments... Perhaps we might have been able to defend her by relying on everyone... She probably rushed out alone... to prevent me from coming into danger..."
Mitsuki said every word with a weeping voice.
If possible, I really wanted to stroke her head and comfort her but she was hugging my right arm while my injured left arm could not move. As a result, I could only remain motionless and silent.
Thus, I waited until Mitsuki's emotions calmed down and her trembling stopped. Then I said:

"Mitsuki, I now understand what happened between you and Shinomiya Miyako. Thanks to that, I can be certain now."
"...Certain?"
Mitsuki stared at me with her eyes, red from crying.
"Yeah, Mitsuki, you're the one who feels the most chagrin over what happened to Shinomiya Miyako. You're also the one who kept working hard despite the pain without avoiding it. There's no need for you to suffer Lisa's condemnation."
To observe Mitsuki's reaction, I deliberately made it sound like I was accusing Lisa.
"P-Please hold on! This is neither here nor there! Miyako was dear to Lisa-san too, which is why she has the right to reproach me!"
Mitsuki frantically defended Lisa, I knew it—Things were like that.
The truth that I had heard from Firill... She said that Lisa did not actually hate Mitsuki.
Hence, I came up with a hypothesis and it looked like I had guessed right.
"The right to reproach you... Mitsuki, have you ever sought Lisa's forgiveness?"
"That sort of thing... I have not. Because... I have done something absolutely unforgivable."
Mitsuki shook her head. I see. This was why the problem had gotten so complicated. While feeling exasperated, I asked Mitsuki:
"Last time, Mitsuki, you said that you continue to fight dragons as atonement, right? But based on what you just said, even if you defeated all the dragons, Lisa still won't forgive you, right?"
"...Of course not, because they are unrelated matters."
"Sigh..."
I sighed deeply.
"N-Nii-san, why are you making such an exasperated expression?"
"Of course I'm exasperated—Can you try being a little considerate for Lisa?"
"Eh...?"
Mitsuki looked at me in surprise. It looked like she did not get it at all.
"To stay angry persistently because of one incident, to persistently hate someone, that's very tiring, you know? If you were truly considerate for Lisa, then create an opportunity for Lisa to forgive you, how about that?"
"B-But I do not know whether she wants to forgive me either, that would be too shameless..."
"Whether it is shameless or not, that's for Lisa to decide. Even if you end up angering her, it's not like it's the first time."
Although I continued to persuade, Mitsuki still remained hesitant. Her gaze wandered.
"But..."
"Mitsuki, do you really refuse forgiveness that much?"
"O-Of course not!"
With a dramatic change in expression Mitsuki yelled.

"In that case, you will ask Lisa tomorrow what you must do to earn her forgiveness. This is an order."
"Order...? My rank is higher than yours, you know?"
Mitsuki glared at me with displeasure.
"But I'm your older brother, right?"
"...What do you mean by that? That is too tyrannical!"
Mitsuki pouted unhappily.
"Then are you going to use your authority as a superior officer to negate my order?"
".....No, I will follow it, because I hate the idea that others thought I were escaping."
Mitsuki answered after a few seconds.
Hearing her reply, I exhaled in relief.
"As expected of my little sister who hates losing."
"Muu... Say whatever you like."
Mitsuki closed her eyes defiantly but continued to hug my arm tightly, refusing to let go.
"Do your best. I support you."
After whispering softly to Mitsuki who was about to sleep, I closed my eyes too.
During our long conversation, drowsiness had already arrived quietly at the fringes of my consciousness. Although Mitsuki's body warmth and softness felt so attractive, I seemed able to fall asleep by obeying this drowsiness.
"...Thank you, Nii-san."
—Just before entering the realm of dreams, I seemed to hear those words.

Part 4

"Nii-san, rise and shine, Nii-san."
The next morning, Mitsuki roused me from sleep by rocking my shoulder.
"Hmm...?"
I rubbed my eyes and got up. Mitsuki pulled me by my arm.
"Come, hurry over, we have arrived."
"Arrived where...?"
Still half asleep, I could not recall instantly why Mitsuki was in the room. Neither could i remember where this was.
But after Mitsuki brought me to the window side and I saw the expansive view beyond the glass, my drowsiness was instantly swept away.
"Wow..."
Only an island in the scenery of the sea yesterday, it was apparently a volcanic island. Beautifully triangular, the mountain peak had white smoke rising from it. There were almost no plants on the island while the sides of the mountain were covered by what seemed to be black rocks solidified from lava.
The ship seemed to be moving along the island's perimeter. After a while, an artificially developed coastline gradually came into view.
"When the operation was drafted and a reconnaissance team was sent here, a simple pier had already been constructed. Until Basilisk approached, we will remained moored there."
Mitsuki looked ahead along the ship's direction and explained.
"We'll be living here for now... Can we go on the island?"
"You may go ashore freely, but there are forbidden places including the area near the volcano's mouth. I will explain the details during today's meeting."
Saying that, Mitsuki left the window and returned to the bedside, picking up her pillow.
"You're going back to your cabin?"
"Yes, there is still time before breakfast, which is why I would like to take a shower first. Umm... Others might misunderstand if your smell lingered on my body."
Mitsuki looked away shyly.
"I-I see, then I'd better take a shower too."
Feeling conscious of the scent from my right arm that Mitsuki had hugged, I was about to bring my nose closer to sniff when...

"...Stop, d-do not do that! It is sexual harassment!"
Her face bright red, Mitsuki frantically stopped me.
"S-Sorry."
"Please enter the bathroom directly! No sniffing, anyone who does that is a pervert!"
"—Understood. I'll take a shower right away, I promise you."
Because I did not want my younger sister to think of me as a pervert, I instantly promised her.
"...Cross your heart, hope to die?"
Blushing, Mitsuki reminded me again.
"Yeah—Anyway, enough about me, Mitsuki, do you still remember last night's promise?"
Asking Lisa what it would take to forgive her—I checked with Mitsuki to confirm that she had not forgotten.
"Of course. How could I be the student council president if I were that forgetful?"
Mitsuki answered with displeasure and rapidly walked to the cabin's exit.
But when she stopped when she gripped the door handle. Quietly, she said:
"...But I think that Lisa-san will definitely not forgive me."
"Even if that's true, it's still progress compared to you trying to guess Lisa's thoughts and feelings on your own."
"Indeed—You have a point."
Mitsuki smiled wryly and quietly left the room.
Then I walked to the bathroom to keep my promise with Mitsuki.

During the meeting after breakfast, we received a booklet which contained a map of the island and various reminders.
Thinking this resembled a guide for a school outing, I opened it up to have a look, only to find introductions to various attractions on the island, featuring especially cute illustrations.
—Someone really is treating this like a school outing!
I ridiculed in my heart.
I checked the copyright page to find that Shinomiya-sensei was apparently the one who put the handbook together. In accordance with her reputation of flawless perfection, she apparently had talent in drawing too. However, my image of her was shattered. She turned out to be an unexpectedly humorous person.
There were various places on the map marked with skulls. Warnings were placed near these locations to restrict entry because of poisonous volcanic gases.
At the end of examining the this overhead view of the island that was about to become a battlefield, I discovered a hot spring symbol.
As a main attraction, the hot spring even had a special feature written on a separate page to introduce it, even providing detailed explanations of the

water composition and effects. The words of skin beautification were bolded for emphasis. There also seemed to be restorative effects for the sick and injured.
—Lemme check it out some time before the battle.
Thinking that, I shifted my gaze forward. Mitsuki was standing in front of the whiteboard in the conference room, talking about the contents of the booklet in her hand.
Mitsuki was not acting unusually in any way, but sitting diagonally in front of me, Lisa was staring at Mitsuki with an indescribable expression. It seemed like a chaotic mixture of emotions.
Perhaps Mitsuki had talked to Lisa already. This was very likely, seeing as Mitsuki was not the type to procrastinate on what needed to be done.
I could not guess the outcome even after looking at the two of them.
I'll know anyway once I ask Mitsuki later—I thought that to myself but did not expect the answer to arrive unexpectedly early.
After the meeting ended, just as I was about to exit the conference room, Lisa grabbed my arm from behind.
"Hold it right there, Mononobe Yuu. I have a few things to say to you."
Lisa was speaking with an angry expression and immediately closed the conference room door. With only the two of us in the room, Lisa glared at me angrily with raised eyebrows and interrogated:
"You said something unnecessary to Mitsuki-san, didn't you?"
"Hmm—Judging from this, you and Mitsuki already talked?"
Hearing me say that, Lisa became even more angry.
"I knew it was your meddling! Otherwise, Mitsuki-san could not possibly have asked me suddenly what would it take for me to forgive her!"
"...I simply told Mitsuki to think of things from your side."
I revealed what I had done truthfully. There was no reason for me to hide things.
"What... W-Why did I come up in your conversation?"
"Uh, because you don't actually hate Mitsuki, right?"
I revealed the truth I had heard from Firill.
"T-That is—W-Why would you know that in the first place?"
"I didn't know, but I got it from a trustworthy source."
"...I see now, it was Firill-san? I never expected even for her to have a part in this—"
Lisa tossed her hair in agitation.
"Then that means I'm right, doesn't it? Lisa, you've been pretending all the way until now that you haven't forgiven Mitsuki, because she craves punishment herself."
"Ooh..."
Lisa was unable to retort. I concluded that my guess was correct.
"But doing that must sadden you, Lisa, because you actually hold Mitsuki quite dear, but to keep reproaching her—"

"I do not need you to worry about me. I am simply doing what is necessary for family. If serving as her 'punishment' would help ease Mitsuki-san's guilt, I shall persist in it."
With arms akimbo, Lisa declared firmly. She was amazing indeed. I was thoroughly impressed with her kindness and fortitude, but this time, her strength in conviction was being counterproductive.
"—Yes, that definitely was necessary in the beginning. Thanks to you, Lisa, I think Mitsuki was saved quite substantially. But don't you think that you're being overprotective if you keep treating her that way even after two years have passed?"
"O-Overprotective!?"
Lisa widened her eyes, her expression looked like she had heard something unexpected.
"Yeah, Mitsuki has already decided to confront her guilt. She believes that fighting dragons incessantly is her responsibility. Isn't this single 'punishment' already enough for Mitsuki?"
"B-But..."
Lisa stammered in hesitation. She was probably quite rattled, wondering if that was really okay.
"Say—How did you reply to Mitsuki's question of what would it take for you to forgive her?"
"...Because it came too suddenly, I could not give her any reply. I still have not responded yet."
Hearing her say that, I reached out and grabbed Lisa's shoulder with my right hand.
"Kyah!? W-What are you doing?"
Lisa shrank away in fear while I said to her:
"If that's the case, you'd better consider it carefully. If you're worried about Mitsuki, set a condition for her, because I'm sure she'll clear any kind of trial no matter what it is."
"H-How confident you are. Aren't you too biased in favor of your sister?"
Blushing slightly, Lisa remarked with sarcasm.
"As the older brother, believing in the younger sister goes without saying."
"...Hmph, in that case, I will think of a very difficult condition. Even if it causes Mitsuki-san distress, it will be your fault!"
Saying that, Lisa shoved me away and quickly exited the conference room.
"Hmm, did I provoke her too much...?"
A bit worried, I walked into the corridor as well. Immediately, I found Firill poking her head out from behind a nearby pillar.
"...Good work, Mononobe-kun."
"Don't tell me you heard our entire conversation?"
Hearing me say that, Firill nodded in confession.
"...Yes, I was eavesdropping outside. Then because Lisa came out, I hid."
Fearing that things were now awkward between Firill and Lisa, I felt apologetic to her.

"Oh, umm... Sorry, because of the way I worded things, Lisa guessed that you're the one who advised me."
"...This is fine, I don't mind. To me personally, this result is good enough."
"Eh? But nothing's resolved yet?"
I was surprised at Firill's response. Currently, Lisa was still at the stage of deciding the condition required to forgive Mitsuki.
"Even if it's not resolved yet, the situation has definitely made progress... A result will probably come soon. Just as we promised... I have to give you a reward."
"No, it's okay. I didn't do much."
Although I would feel bad accepting a reward I did not deserve, that was not the entire reason. In addition, I had a sense of foreboding, prompting me to refuse Firill's offer.
"...No need to be shy. I will prepare a present you'd enjoy. Look forward to it."
But Firill ignored what I said and declared that.
Watching Firill laugh "...hehehe" suggestively, I prayed intensely in my heart, please, don't be anything troublesome—

Part 5

After our life at the volcanic island started, I realized that it was actually quite similar to our daily lives at Midgard.
Every day started with breakfast in the morning. On days with meetings, we went to the conference, otherwise, there were indoor lessons. After lunch, we went on the island for practical training or listened to status reports on the war against Basilisk. After that, I tutored Tia on homework, ate dinner then went to bed.
If there was anything different from before, that was living in closer proximity to the girls. Due to living together on the same ship, having meals together became habitual and usual.
Although the matter between Mitsuki and Lisa was still unresolved, the two of them went back to normal on the surface.
What worried me was Iris, who seemed to be getting increasingly unsettled as the days went by, and Firill, who was going to prepare some kind of present for me.
I knew the reason behind for Iris' uneasiness. Or rather, I should call it specific urging.
Just earlier, she was saying to me "when are you coming to my room...?" in a sulking manner. This whole time, she had apparently been waiting for the "continuation" of our conversation on the first day.
On my side, I wanted to fulfill that promise too but after the incident with Firill, Mitsuki's supervision became even more strict, limiting my movements. ALthough Mitsuki only spent the night in my cabin that one time, since my diligent little sister made frequent visits to my room, I could not find the opportunity to do it.
However, I had also heard many times that Tia wanted to sneak off to my room and due to Mitsuki taking precautions on my behalf, so I had nothing to complain about. All thanks to her, I was able to sleep in peace.
Then after these normal days persisted for five days, one of the girls who worried me—Firill—made a move.
During a lunch break, I left the dining table to go to the washroom and Firill chased after me.
"...Mononobe-kun, I've prepared the reward."
"W-What is... the reward?"

I gulped and asked. The reason why I was reflexively on guard was because I remembered her prank last time. Another one like that would be more than I could take.
"Here, for you."
"...Huh?"
Seeing the small slip of paper in her hand, I frowned. It was apparently paper cut out from a notebook. There was handwriting on the faintly lined paper.
"One day hot spring coupon... Expires today?"
I read out the words on it and Firill nodded to confirm.
"...Yes, you know there is a hot spring on the island, right?"
"Yeah, the handbook covered it."
I answered, perplexed.
"I've already tried it, a wonderful place. But I'm guessing you still haven't gone, right, Mononobe-kun?"
"Yeah, because everyone on this ship is a girl apart from me. It'd be bad if we ran into each other in the hot spring."
Since I knew that hot springs were very popular with girls, I knew I had better not go for now and give up a long time ago. However, Firill smiled and presented her handwritten coupon.
"Indeed... That's precisely why this one day coupon was born. You can enjoy the hot spring as much as you like today."
"Meaning that the hot spring is for my exclusive use today?"
"...Something like that. Today, the hot spring exists for you, Mononobe-kun."
Saying that, Firill stuffed the coupon in to my hand.
"Enjoy it well."
"O-Okay... Thank you. I never expected to receive such a considerate present."
Precisely because I expected a preposterous reward beforehand, I felt quite touched now. The thoughtful handwriting on the coupon instantly gave me a heartwarming feeling.
"...Fufu, you should thank me only after you've enjoyed the hot spring."
Firill touched her hand to her lips, smiling as though she found things very humorous.
Thinking about it after the fact, I realized it was an impish smile.
But immersed in touched feelings, I failed to discern Firill's true intentions and simply looked forward to the hot spring.

After dinner that day, I immediately took a towel and left my cabin.
Walking off the ship's gangway ladder and arriving on the volcanic island's shore, I felt slightly unsteady on my feet. Having lived on a rocking ship for a while, it felt unstable on solid land instead.

But that disrupted sense of balance soon recovered. Stepping on hard rock, I made my way to the hot spring.
The volcanic island was dark at night. With the starry sky as the backdrop, I could see the black, towering silhouette of the conical mountain. However, there was lighting around the pier and along the route to the hot spring, most likely because many people wanted to have a dip at night. Just by following the lighting, there was no need for a map.
It was less than five minute's walking from the pier to the hot spring. Following those regularly spaced lights, I arrived at a shore surrounded by rocks. It looked like an inlet on first glance, but I could see white steam rising inside.
According to the explanation in the handbook, the hot spring flowed out from inside the inlet. Because the inlet was connected to the sea, its outskirts had seawater but the inner side did not contain salt because it was isolated by the rocks.
As soon as I approached, I was struck by the distinct smell of sulfur that characterized hot springs. The hot spring's water was a cloudy milky color. I could not see the bottom, but it was probably not very deep.
Just to be on the safe side, I checked out the surroundings. Apart from me, there seemed to be no one else present.
Next to the hot spring was even a simple changing room. I cautiously peered inside but there were still no signs of others, only baskets for putting in clothing and buckets for bathing.
I sighed in relief.
Apparently, just as Firill had said, the hot spring really was for my exclusive use.
I swiftly undressed in the changing room and made my way to the hot spring with a towel and bucket. Using the bucket to scoop up hot water and check the temperature, I rinsed my body a bit before entering hot spring for a dip. The water was roughly a bit more than knee height.
"Phew..."
I could not help but exhale. Although my left shoulder's wound felt some slight stinging, it was not painful. Not only that, a sense of warmth was gradually seeping into the surroundings of the wound, washing away the lingering dull ache.
"What a great hot spring..."
Outside the inlet, on the other side of the rocky shore was a stretch of calm sea. Countless stars were twinkling in the cloudless sky, decorating the world of night. This scenery was impeccable.
I felt that it had been quite a few years since I last experienced such a calming time.
—I really have to thank Firill.
I submerged myself into the hot water up to my shoulders, carefully savoring the blissful experience.
But just at that moment, I noticed several voices approaching.

"...Huh?"
Originally relaxed, my consciousness instantly became wide awake as though cold water had been dumped on my head.
"Having a bath together with everyone feels so great!"
It was Iris' voice.
"Honestly speaking, this is slightly embarrassing for me..."
"It didn't feel like my thing at first, but it became fun after I got used to it. This is what they call skinship, right?"
I could even hear Lisa and Ariella's voices.
"Yes, this is what they call it in Japan."
"Mm."
Mitsuki and Ren expressed agreement.
"Tia feels it'd be nice if Yuu came along."
Then I could even hear Tia's voice.
"...Fufu, if Mononobe-kun were present, all members would be gathered."
—Hey, even Firill's here!
I screamed in my mind. What the heck was going on?
Just as my mind turned into a mass of chaos, unable to take any action, the girls had already entered the changing room.
Having missed the chance to yell and alert them, I was totally panicking inside. But on further thought, my removed clothing was still in the changing room. As soon as they found my clothing, they would probably discover my presence. After all, I was the only one wearing a male uniform.
However, all I heard was mirth in the changing room. There were no cries of surprise from discovering my clothes.
...This was too weird.
Just as I decided it would be best if I announced my presence on my own, I was just about to yell towards the changing room when—
"I'm the first!"
Stark naked, Iris came out of the changing room and jumped into the hot spring with a splash.
—Gah!?
I frantically hid myself behind a nearby rock. Thanks to this being a natural hot spring, there were many spots to hide out of sight.
"Iris-san, jumping into the water like this is very rude."
Then Lisa apparently appeared, correcting Iris with exasperation.
Now I could no longer afford to make a reckless move. If I went out in this situation, I would run into Iris and the others in their naked state.
—Indecision leads to death.
For some reason, what flashed through my mind was the voice of my former commanding officer, Major Loki.
"Don't be rigid. There's no other people after all. I actually wanted to try jumping into the water long ago."
Then I heard Ariella's voice and a loud splash.
"Mm!"

This was followed by another splash. Ren apparently jumped into the water too.
"How rare it is to see Ren-san so unreserved."
"Tia is an adult and will enter the water normally."
Mitsuki and Tia apparently entered the hot spring too.
"...On the other hand, I will insist I'm a child and jump into the water."
The one who entered the water with a violent splash last seemed to be Firill. With that, the whole team had gathered.
Was there a way to find an opening to leave while everyone was taking a dip in the hot spring?
I quietly peered out from behind the rock to check the surroundings.
On the other side of the steam, I could see my classmates' pale and naked bodies. I gulped and frantically shifted my gaze away.
—No good. If I left the hot spring now, there was no way in hell I'd escape detection.
Even if I wanted to head towards the sea while swimming underwater, I would still need to traverse the rocky area along the way, which meant I would surely be seen too.
Apart from hiding here and waiting for the girls to leave, there did not seem to be any other way to survive safely.
"Wow! Lisa-chan's boobs are so big! They're floating lightly in the hot water!"
"I-Iris-san, please do not poke me with your finger!"
"Ah, the sensation is different from mine. It's more soft and fluffy than elastic... Like marshmallows."
"Nnnn... Yah—S-Stop it or else I shall retaliate!"
"Kyau!? T-That tickles, Lisa-chan!"
I heard dialogue from Iris and Lisa playing around.
"Mm—"
"Ren-san, I can understand how you feel, but swimming in a bath is a bit..."
Then I heard Mitsuki reprimanding Ren.
Immediately, I heard splashing like someone was swimming.
"Oh, Tia wants to swim too!"
"S-Seriously, Tia-san, did you not say you were an adult just now?"
"Since the bath is so wide, who cares? I'm joining in."
"Even you, Ariella-san!?"
Tia and Ariella seemed to have started swimming while Mitsuki was left at a loss what to do about them.
"Mitsuki-chan, save me!"
I heard Iris' voice. She had apparently fled from Lisa.
"Kyah!? Do not hug me so suddenly!"
"Wow, Mitsuki-chan's skin is so smooth and soft."
"Hyan!? Where do you think you are touching!?"
"What kind of soap do you normally use, Mitsuki-chan? Oh, or do you use body wash?"

"I-I will tell you, so release me~"
The mood was very lively. Everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves. However, I did not seem to be hearing Firill's voice.
"—Ah, so you're over here."
"!?"
Firill suddenly poked her head out from the other side of rock where I was hiding. Almost crying out, I hastily covered my mouth.
"...Mononobe-kun, are you enjoying the view?"
Firill joined me behind the rock and peered at my face from below, and of course, she was naked. Her pale and voluptuous breasts were floating on the water. Due to the hot spring's milky white color, I could not see beneath the water surface, but the sight was plenty stimulating already.
"Firill, w-what is going on!? This wasn't what you said! Why is everyone here? Isn't the hot spring for my exclusive use today?"
I lowered my voice as much as possible and questioned Firill.
"...Nothing wrong here, it's totally for you and us to use today. This is the experience I prepared for you."
"By saying you prepared it, don't tell me that Iris and the others also know I'm here?"
"No, everyone doesn't know. I covered up the clothes in the changing room with my own before they could notice, so it's fine. Now you can secretly feast your eyes on the naked body of girls. Are you happy?"
Firill cocked her head and asked me. The hot water accumulated between her bountiful breasts looked especially salacious.
"H-How could I possibly be happy? By doing this, you're only making me feel troubled."
"...Honestly? Aren't guy supposed to be happy to see girls naked? See, your heart rate is currently so fast, right?"
Firill pressed her hand on my left chest and spoke.
"That... goes without saying. The results are unthinkable if I get discovered. How can you expect me to keep calm!?"
Actually, the main reason was due to Firill appearing naked before me, but I could not bring myself to say that explicitly, after all.
"...Really? Did I do something wrong? Are you that troubled?"
Firill immediately made a sad look and dejectedly sank her body deeply into the hot spring.
"Oh... No, I—"
Did I go too far? I felt sorry for her. Perhaps this situation was the result of Firill doing everything she could to make be happy.
I was just about to say something to the depressed Firill when something suddenly emerged from the hot spring.
"Puha!"
Taking a deep breath, shaking water off herself, it was Tia, completely nude.
"Eh...?"

Too surprised, I could not help but exclaim.
Tia kept blinking and staring into my eyes. She was apparently swimming underwater for fun just now.
"Oh, it's Yuu and Firill. Eh? But why is Yuu here?"
Tia asked in puzzlement without hiding her body at all. I could not help but feel my gaze drawn to her pale and tender skin.
Still immature, her body lacked undulating curves but the slightly bulging chest gave a sense of budding femininity. I felt my heart rate rise involuntarily.
"...Be quiet. If anyone else discovers him, Mononobe-kun will be very troubled."
Since I was unable to answer, Firill covered Tia's mouth lightly and replied.
"Really? Tia knows. Tia won't let husband feel troubled."
Tia answered quietly then leaned against me while my body was frozen.
"...T-Tia?"
"Yuu—Tia will be quiet and be a good girl, so can Tia be with you?"
Tia pressed herself tightly against me, putting me in a fluster.
"H-Hold on, this is bad. D-Don't do this kind of thing."
"Why? Did Tia do something that Yuu dislikes?"
I advised her quietly but Tia ignored me and pressed her body tightly against me. The direct contact with soft skin was making me dizzy.
"I-It's not that I dislike it..."
If I denied it sloppily, Tia might think I did not like her company. While searching for words to persuade her without hurting her feelings, I stood there frozen, not knowing what to do.
"...So Mononobe-kun does not dislike this kind of thing."
But my comment was apparently getting misinterpreted. Originally watching my conversation with Tia, Firill clapped her hands together.
"Hmm, I guess I really need to help you enjoy yourself to the max."
Saying that, Firill circled around to my back.
"Eh...? H-Hey?"
"...Here!"
Sensing she was about to do something, wariness and fear surfaced in my heart. At this moment, Firill pressed her massive bust onto my back.
That unbelievable softness and seductive sensation was blanking out my mind.
"Wha—"

I was no longer capable of saying a single sentence.
"...One, two, three, okay—That's it."
After counting up to three, Firill left me. Perhaps having bathed for too long, Firill's face was a little red.
"...My heart is beating so fast. Luckily, I already learned beforehand that this can happen without being in love."
Firill pressed her hand against her left chest, exhaling hot breath.
"Or else I might have jumped to a wrong conclusion."
Speaking with a blushing face, Firill say that then asked me:
"...Mononobe-kun, are you happy I did that?"
"No, umm... Well, if I had to say it, I was very happy..."
I affirmed in a stammer and Firill smiled and seemed to breathe a sigh of relief.
"...That's great."
I was mesmerized by her facial expression for a while. At this moment, Tia hugged me tightly.
"Husband really likes people with big boobs after all?"
Tia pouted and glared up at me.
"It's not like that—No, by the way, Tia, can you let go of me first? Otherwise, I can't talk calmly."
"No, Yuu forgot about Tia just now so Tia has to hug you tight to make sure you don't forget again!"
While we were talking, the other voices grew louder naturally. But it was too late by the time we noticed.
"Tia-san? Are you over there?"
Mitsuki's voice came from the other side of the rock. Our shoulders, Tia and mine, both shook at the same time.
"Oh dear, Firill-san also disappeared without me noticing."
Lisa also noticed and commented on Firill's absence.
"...Shhh—"
Firill brought a finger to her lip and hushed us. Then slowly, she walked out from behind the rock.
"I'm here. Tia-san and I were having a quick chat."
"Yeah, Tia is here too!"
Despite a look of reluctance, Tia released me and emerged from the rock to show herself to Mitsuki and the others.
"Really... I think I heard Nii-san's voice too."
Hearing Mitsuki say that, I felt cold sweat slide down my face.
"...Mononobe-kun's voice? Did you imagine it?"
Although Firill tried to feign ignorance, it seemed to deepen Mitsuki's suspicions instead.
"This feels very suspicious. Just to be on the safe side, I shall confirm."
With the splashing sound of someone walking, I sensed Mitsuki's presence gradually approaching.
What to do—At this rate, I was definitely going to be discovered.

Should I move underwater to the back of another rock? No... even though the water was murky, with this amount of depth, the chances of being seen while moving was very high when under all gazes.
Thinking it was not the time for recklessness, I concluded my only option was hiding in the water.
This was a gamble on whether I could hold my breath all the way until Mitsuki left... Although I felt that it was futile resistance, it was all I could do.
Listening to the approaching water noises, I calculated the timing to submerge myself.
Three more steps... Two... One... Now!
—Pururururururururu.
But just as I was going to submerge, an electronic sound came from the changing room. Mitsuki's footsteps also stopped.
"Seems like an emergency call."
Saying that, Mitsuki then left for the changing room.
—I-I'm saved...
I exhaled deeply in relief while Tia bowed her head and apologized to me.
"Sorry, Yuu, Tia did not keep promise and made too much noise."
"No, my voice was heard too, so it's not your fault, Tia."
I caressed Tia's horned head and answered quietly.
But what was with that emergency call just now? Feeling concerned, I listened intently. Then I sensed Mitsuki returning from the changing room.
"—Important news, everyone."
Opening with that, Mitsuki then continued:
"Tomorrow morning, NIFL will be putting their plan into motion. Although details are as yet unknown, NIFL predicts a 90% chance of success. Almost assuredly—Basilisk will be defeated."

Chapter 3 - Mistelteinn Falling from Heaven

Part 1

The red monster was moving across a whitened sea surface.
Roughly fifty meters in body length, its appearance would probably be best summed up as that of a giant lizard. However, this creature was not just a gigantic reptile.
A clearly harmful existence that humanity even feared to fight, while being the dragon that humanity had left alone for roughly two decades—"Red" Basilisk.
It was also the name of a legendary monster recorded in ancient myths.
It was extremely difficult for humans to approach Basilisk, but if they could witness this monster up close, anyone would probably hold their breath in response to its intimidating visage.
As humanity's foe, Basilisk was quite magnificent and resplendent in appearance.
After all, Basilisk's body was covered with red-tinted scales of diamond. Around its neck and on its back where giant crystals shaped like stone pillars, giving off dazzling brilliance.
Accordingly, its body weight seemed quite heavy. On every step, its feet sank into the ground of salt. The scene was almost like watching a small mountain move.
Despite moving slowly, Basilisk was undoubtedly moving steadily. Without hesitation, neither sleeping nor resting, it gradually approached its destination.
Finally, the world of white broke off, giving way to the navy-blue ocean.
However, as soon as Basilisk shot out red beams from its eyes, the wavy sea surface instantly turned into a desert of salt.
This was precisely why Basilisk was feared. The power known as "petrification" in legends of the past.
However, such a description was inaccurate, because the true nature of Basilisk's power was something else.
While creating a road of salt on the sea, Basilisk moved forward, step by step.
Nothing was capable of halting its advance. At least, that was the way things were originally—
With a shudder of its body, Basilisk seemed to react to something and looked up into the sky.

The monster's eyes, the bane of all creation, clearly captured what had appeared high in the sky, even beyond the range of its red beams of petrification.
Then Basilisk instantly realized it was something dangerous to it—

Part 2

After Mitsuki and the girls left the hot spring in a hurry, I made my way to the changing room while staying vigilant of my surroundings. An emergency meeting was about to be held, so I had to hurry back. My terminal back in my cabin had probably received the same notification too.
Unable to find my clothes in the changing room, I felt nervous for a moment until I found them placed behind the shelves. Firill probably hid them for me to prevent others from seeing them.
Hence, I hastily put on my clothes, returned to the ship and went directly to the conference room. It looked like I made it in time. Everyone was still chatting in the room.
The flush on their faces from the bath had not subsided yet, making them look especially sexy. I also seemed to be smelling a fragrant scent.
"—Nii-san, you are late."
Just as I was experiencing their after-bath aura, Mitsuki spoke to me from the side.
"Oh, uh… I was a bit occupied."
"Judging from the way you look Nii-san, you just had a bath too?"
Mitsuki asked while staring at my face. Thinking closely, I was soaked in the hot spring even longer than everyone else. That combined with abundant stimulation, my face was probably even redder than the girls'.
"Y-Yeah, I happened to be showering, so I found out about the notification a bit later."
Concealing the wavering in my heart, I explained myself. Mitsuki glared at me suspiciously but after seeing Shinomiya-sensei enter the conference room, she sighed.
"Hoo—Very well, let us assume that was what happened. Shinomiya-sensei has arrived too. Nii-san, take your seat."
Hence, I sat down at Mitsuki's urging.
After confirming that everyone were seated, Shinomiya-sensei stood in front of the whiteboard and started to talk.
"—I was just notified by NIFL that they will carry out their long-planned operation at 0600 tomorrow. They believe that things will be settled with almost complete certainty with this. If their prediction proves to be correct, then there will be nothing left for us to do."
Hearing this, Lisa raised her hand and spoke.

"From our standpoint, if NIFL were to defeat Basilisk, that would be fine and all... But would things really go that smoothly?"
"Well, they seem to have substantial grounds backing their claim. Apart from detailed specifics of the operation, NIFL has provided us with all the latest data they have gathered and analyzed. Let's take a look together now."
Shinomiya-sensei operated something resembling a remote, then a screen was lowered from the ceiling. The lights switched off and the screen displayed what seemed to be the data provided by NIFL.
"According to this data, NIFL has not only identified Basilisk's power but also used various methods to corroborate. If their operation was devised based on this data, reliability ought to be quite high."
"...So they've identified Basilisk's power."
Hearing Firill's light whisper, Shinomiya-sensei nodded in confirmation while using a laser pointer on the data on the screen.
"It has already come to light that the true nature of the phenomenon caused by Basilisk's red light is—Weathering."
Hearing Shinomiya-sensei say that, a clamor started in the room. But sitting in front of me, Tia looked back and asked me quietly:
"Yuu, what is weathering?"
"Uh... Take a huge rock for example. If it's exposed to sun and rain constantly, it'll crack and break apart, becoming smaller and smaller, right? Weathering refers to changes like that, which are caused by time."
Listening to our conversation, Shinomiya-sensei nodded firmly in agreement then continued:
"—Indeed, the cause of weathering is time. In other words, Basilisk attacks by speeding up time."
Speeding up... time?
Although Shinomiya-sensei said it so nonchalantly, wasn't that actually quite outrageous?
"By experimenting with different radioactive substances of varying half-lives, NIFL observed the passage of hundreds to several tens of thousands of years in materials that were exposed to the Basilisk's red light. Although the range is quite wide, further analysis revealed that the effect depended on the duration of exposure. Taking this factor into account, it is now known that a single second of exposure results in fast forwarding two thousand years or so."
"T-Two thousand years huh..."
Even Mitsuki's voice went hoarse.
"Yes, a human would turn into bones or dust in an instant. This is the most terrible attack for living creatures. We have tentatively named this power 'Catastrophe.' Although scholars seem to be hypothesizing something about tachyons, the fundamental mechanism still eludes understanding. But now that the phenomenon has been identified as weathering, it is possible to devise countermeasures."

Shinomiya-sensei shifted her laser pointer then proceeded to explain the NIFL's intended plan.
"Time will affect all matter without exception. But even so, there exists materials that do not change easily. Materials of that sort should be able to endure Basilisk's light to some extent. The method they are using this time is to drop a mithril-covered bomb vertically from the sky above the target."
The laser pointed at a photograph depicting the bomb's appearance. Shaped like an upside-down cone, wide and flat, it resembled a top.
"Just as all of you know, mithril is the hardest and most stable alloy, the best choice for making shields. Through rigorous calculations regarding the durability of mithril, a weapon capable of reaching Basilisk has been designed—the large-scale anti-Basilisk bomb, Mistilteinn."
Mistilteinn... I recalled that it was a spear featured in Norse mythology, made from a parasitic plant, but that was not important. If what was said so far were true, then this weapon could almost certainly kill Basilisk. No wonder NIFL was so confident.
I raised my hand and asked Shinomiya-sensei:
"What is the probability of success in your view, Shinomiya-sensei?"
"—50%, I guess. Dragons are unknown beings and the data obtained so far cannot be guaranteed to be correct. NIFL believes that there are no other options apart from this. They seem to think that their operation will succeed, but I cannot share such optimism."
Shinomiya-sensei shrugged and answered gravely.
"No other options...? Since its power has been analyzed so thoroughly, there should be other ways..."
"It can be said that there are no other methods precisely because its power has been analyzed. Dropping a bomb vertically was chosen because a ballistic missile flying on a parabolic trajectory would have its kinetic energy *weathered* away the instant it is exposed to the red light. In this regard, if gravity substitutes for propulsion, its effects will still persist despite the fast forwarding of time. And using projectile weaponry is also a crucial point, because NIFL's beam weaponry is useless due to scattering by the diamond scales."
After hearing this explanation, I definitely could not think of other methods. But perhaps Mitsuki could. She raised her hand and asked Shinomiya-sensei.
"What about land mines? According to precedent, the red light does not affect the ground surface very much, possibly because there is very little change to the land even after thousands of years. If that is the case, as long as bombs were installed underground before hand..."
"That has been tried already, but Basilisk will sweep everything in front of its direction of advance, which means that the land mines must be placed deep in the ground to be free from the effects. But with that, the explosion would be discovered before it reaches the ground surface and the explosion itself would end up getting fast forwarded by the light."

"The explosion itself will... Then our plan needs to thoroughly revised too."
Mitsuki fell into deep thought with a troubled expression.
On the Midgard side, our plan was to use the volcanic island as cover to launch our attacks, wiping out Basilisk together with the island. But that was almost no different from detonating landmines at Basilisk's feet. As the saying goes, offense is the best defense. Basilisk's power was precisely that.
"Fortunately, we still have time, so let's think of a new battle plan based on the data we have received this time. That being said, if NIFL were to defeat Basilisk for us, we won't need to worry."
Shinomiya spoke with a wry smile then switched on the light in the room and retracted the screen.
"Assemble at the bridge at 0530 tomorrow. NIFL will send a live feed of their operation to us. They seem quite eager to show off their power to us."
"0530..."
Firill expressed overt resentment in her tone. Perhaps she was not good at getting up early.
"Don't oversleep, okay? If anyone fails to show up at the appointed time, I will personally punch them awake."
After reminding us, Shinomiya-sensei left the conference room. Perhaps with things to discuss, Mitsuki also chased after Shinomiya-sensei rapidly. The other classmates chatted while leaving their seats.
Like everyone else, I was walking to the door when I noticed Tia still sitting in her seat.
"What's wrong, Tia? Meeting's over."
I went back and placed my hand on Tia's shoulder. I immediately felt minor trembling.
"...Are you scared?"
"Yeah... After hearing about Basilisk, Tia suddenly started shaking."
Tia showed uneasiness on her face while looking up at me, speaking in a feeble tone of voice.
"Well, its power is quite outrageous, after all. I can't believe it can fast forward time. It's totally out of this world."
"If someone gets hit by the beam... They'll turn into bones?"
Tia asked me with tears in her eyes.
"It'd be lucky to have bones remaining."
"Tia... absolutely don't want Yuu and everyone to die."
"Don't worry, we don't want to die either. We'll fight without turning into bones. Shinomiya-sensei and Mitsuki will think of a plan to achieve that."
To reassure Tia, I gently stroked her head.
Most likely, Tia finally became able to imagine concrete danger after hearing detail information about Basilisk.
"If only Tia could do something..."
"Tia, you're doing your job just by being here."
"Yeah... But if possible, Tia still wants to do more."
After listening to her, I thought for a while then suggested to her:

"In that case, it'll be very helpful to us if you cheer for us at critical moments. Just by doing that, chances of success will definitely rise for the operation."
"Really?"
"Yeah, because we will have better morale if someone cheers for us. With morale, we'll be able to bring out more power than normal."
Hearing me say that, Tia's face brightened up.
"Tia got it! Tia will cheer for everyone!"
"Good, but you'd better head back to your cabin and sleep earlier tonight. Otherwise, you won't be able to get up tomorrow, you know?"
"Yes! Goodnight, Yuu!"
Tia nodded vigorously and got up from her seat.
"Goodnight, Tia."
I smiled and answered while watching Tia racing off.

Part 3

The next morning, we the members of Brynhildr Class gathered at the bridge punctually.
Perhaps because the transport ship was moored, I did not see many crew. The sun still had yet to rise. From the bridge, the scenery consisted of a volcano's silhouette and a black sea surface with the starry sky as the background.
The bridge had a large monitor divided into several screens showing different videos. One of them showed a dark scene with noise in the signal. Another showed a group of fierce-looking men in military uniforms, standing in a row in a conference room.
'Colonel Shinomiya, watch carefully. Witness the moment when we of NIFL vanquishes Basilisk.'
"Yes, I look forward to it, Major-General Dylan."
Shinomiya-sensei was conversing with Major-General Dylan, a elderly man with a scar on his forehead. Judging from this, the people in the conference room shown on screen were the NIFL cadres involved in this operation.
'Naturally, I hold high regard for your abilities in vanquishing Kraken and Leviathan and driving off Hekatonkheir. Nevertheless, we cannot rely on Ds in every case. Now is the time when we need to defeat a dragon using mankind's power!'
Major-General Dylan shouted loudly. Simply stated, NIFL wanted the accomplishment of defeating a dragon. Surely, they wanted to erase their image as an agency for cleaning up after dragon disasters.
"Mm..."
Seeing the NIFL military officer speak with intimidating presence, Ren hid behind Ariella.
"Ren, what's the matter?"
Feeling strange, I asked her. Ariella smiled wryly and answered for her.
"Oh, Ren isn't very used to adult men."
"I see... Oh, then what about me?"
I was thinking I should feel bad if I had scared her in the past, so I asked.
"Haha, Mononobe-kun, you're fine. Ren said before that you feel like an older brother to her."
"—!? Mm! Mm~!"
Ren went red in the face and hammered her fists on Ariella's back.
"Oh, it was a secret? Sorry sorry."

Ariella scratched her head and apologized. Then Firill, whose upper body had been swaying in drowsiness the whole time, shook, then leaned over and said:

"...Yes, I feel the same way too. Is it because he's Mitsuki's older brother that this impression is reinforced?"
"Eh, but Mononobe is definitely the younger brother type!"
Iris objected at this point.
"That is something I agree with. Mononobe Yuu is not cut out to be an older brother."
"L-Lisa-san, you are being very rude! Nii-san is undoubtedly my older brother!"
Hearing Lisa say that, Mitsuki refute her.
Major-General Dylan could apparently see what was happening on our side. He exhaled with an exasperated look.
'...Your subordinates are quite carefree.'
"I am terribly sorry—Everyone, please be quiet."
Hearing Shinomiya-sensei's warning, we all shut up.
"Umm..."
Tia's tiny voice was heard. Timidly, she walked up to the monitor and stared at the men on the other side.
'That pair of horns... You are the one whose dragon mark changed color this time.'
Major-General Dylan seemed to know about Tia and he spoke in a stiff tone of voice. Tia's horns were reminiscent of a dragon's and were seen as inauspicious, perhaps.
"Umm, Tia will cheer for everyone!"
However, Tia ignored the men's reactions and spoke as loud as she could.
'C-Cheer?'
On the other side, slightly uneasiness was spreading.
"Yes—Thank you for protecting Tia, Uncles! Tia will cheer for you all, so do your best!!"
The fierce-looking men were clearly shaken.
'W-What a good girl.' 'My daughter went through that kind of phase once—'
'Don't those horns look cute on closer examination...?'
Whispering voices could be heard.
Major-General Dylan was speechless for a while, but he coughed then said to Tia:
'Thank you for your well wishes. Leave it to Uncle.'
...I can't believe he called himself "Uncle"...
I stood there in shock, watching them converse, but Major-General Dylan resumed a soldier's demeanor and glared at me, forcing me to gasp.
'You look like you have something to say, soldier.'
"...N-No, nothing of that sort."
Intimidated by a seasoned warrior's forceful aura, I frantically shook my head and denied.
"Jeez, don't bully Yuu!"
'M-My apologies. I will put my all into this operation. Pray forgive me.'

As soon as Tia got angry, the Major-General went into a fluster and his tone of voice changed. He was almost like a grandfather doting on a granddaughter.
Then Major-General Dylan's fierce voice could be heard from the other side:
'Hey—Patch me through to Mistilteinn's transport team immediately. I will speak directly to their spirit.'
Thus, we had a bit of interaction with NIFL and the operation was finally about to begin.
'—Mistilteinn's mithril barrier has been thickened to the maximum weight that can be carried by four large transport aircrafts. Since Basilisk's attack range is roughly 5000 m, we will drop from an altitude of 8000 m.'
Major-General Dylan explained the operation to us.
"Regarding the vertical drop, is it possible to hit the target from that height?"
'Before it enters Basilisk's range, we will use fuel-injected thrusters to make minor position adjustments. Once exposure to the red beam begins, wind will no longer have an effect because all excess energy will be "weathered" away. Pulled by gravity alone, Mistilteinn will fall straight down.'
Major-General Dylan calmly answered Shinomiya-sensei's question.
"What about the possibility of Basilisk focusing on evasive maneuvers instead of counterattacking Mistilteinn?"
'According to all data collected to date, Basilisk always halts and stops moving to intercept whenever any object approaches it. Chances of it committing to escape are very low. Even if it switches to evasive action at the last second, Mistilteinn is capable of homing to some extent. Given Basilisk's slow speed, fleeing is impossible.'
Although Major-General Dylan sounded very confident, I could only find many flaws in the plan based on what I had heard so far. If Basilisk took any unexpected action, the plan would very likely fail.
However, even if the chances of success were almost certainly exaggerated, this plan was definitely the most effective attack devised so far. I hated to admit it but my mind was unable to come up with a better one.
'Well then... It is almost time. We will observe Mistilteinn's outcome together.'
The conference room video feed shrank in size while the screen with signal noise enlarged. This screen had grown brighter than earlier. I realized it was an image of Basilisk, taken from high in the sky extremely far away.
A small black shadow appeared on the white horizon. Although it only looked the size the of a pea, it was most likely Basilisk's figure.
Shown on the top left of the screen, the clock indicated the operation start time.
There was no change in the image, but Mistilteinn should have been dropped from 8000 m already.
Everyone stared at the monitor with bated breaths.

Just as someone gulped audibly, a red light flashed past. The red flash extended from the ground all the way up to the sky. Mistilteinn had probably entered Basilisk's range, 5000 m in the sky.
However, the horrifying time-stealing glow stopped before reaching the top of the sky, then started to be pushed gradually towards the ground.
Most likely, the descending Mistilteinn was blocking the red light. Just as NIFL's data indicated, Mistilteinn could withstand "weathering" from the red light.
But then calamity struck.
The narrow beam of red light rapidly expanded, increasing several times in girth, tearing through the pre-dawn sky.
Then several seconds later, the glow that originally seemed to be pushed back shot straight through the sky all at once.
It was evidence that the obstacle blocking the light had vanished.
'—Hey! What the hell happened!?'
Major-General Dylan's furious shot could be heard from the other side. Then a subordinate appeared on screen.
'Mistilteinn confirmed to be destroyed at approximately 2000 m high in the air. Operation failed, sir.'
'What!? Didn't Mistilteinn use enough mithril to withstand the attack?'
'All we can say is that the weathering rate exceeded our predictions. The observation and analysis team reports that Basilisk's back opened up to reveal a giant eyeball.'
'A new eyeball? Is that the reason why "Catastrophe" powered up...'
Major-General Dylan muttered with a grave expression. He turned his gaze to us.
'—Just as you all saw and heard, our power is apparently still insufficient against dragons.'
"No... Absolutely not. Basilisk opening a previously unseen third eye is evidence that it was cornered."
Although Shinomiya-sensei said that, Major-General Dylan shook his head with a wry smile.
'Even so, it means nothing unless we defeat Basilisk. This new eye—let's call it the third eye from now on—We will send the data over later. Please use it to ensure the success of your operation.'
"Thank you."
Shinomiya-sensei bowed in gratitude. Major-General Dylan nodded in acknowledgement then looked at Tia.
"Uncle..."
'Apologies, our strength was not enough even though you cheered for us.'
"No, it's okay, Uncle, thank you!"
Hearing Tia thank him, Major-General Dylan smiled.
'...Good luck.'

Communications were cut off after these words. The screen turned black. In contrast, the world outside the window gradually brightened, because the sun was rising.
I looked at everyone's face. Although we were a little disappointed, more or less, I could see the light of resolve in the girls' eyes.
They all understood that it was our turn to enter the battlefield.
I clenched my fist and faced forward. Squinting from the rising sun's bright rays, I turned my thoughts to the imminent day of the decisive battle—

Part 4

Ever since NIFL's failed operation on that day, all semblance of a vacation vanished completely.
The battle to protect Tia, laying our lives on the line, was approaching second by second.
Using the data sent by Major-General Dylan, we devised a new plan.
Spending every day on pre-operation drills, we stopped having regular lessons.
The new data regarding Basilisk was quite despairing.
When the eye on its back opened, the range was roughly 10000 m. Exposure to the light caused time to fast forward on the order of hundreds of millions of years.
In light of that, Shinomiya-sensei and Mitsuki thought of an exceedingly simple plan.
Launching attacks capable of piercing diamond scales, with speed faster than it could react, from a blind spot outside Basilisk's attack range—This was what the new plan was about.
NIFL's beam weaponry did not have enough firepower, but Midgard had Ds who met requirements.
On a flat piece of unused land roughly a ten-minute walk from the pier, they were practicing nonstop today as well.
"Well then, Ren-san, let us begin!"
"Mm."
Lisa summoned her fictional armament while Ren placed her hand on Gungnir.
Immediately, Lisa's fictional armament grew in size with astounding speed, turning into a giant spear dozens of meters long. It was so large that one could not even wrap their arms around it, but Lisa and Ren were able to hold the fictional armament up simply through touch.
Fictional armaments were formed by altering the shape of dark matter, hence they could be manipulated through imagination alone. Furthermore, there was one fact, namely, dark matter had the property that it could be passed onto other Ds.
Right now, Lisa was borrowing Ren's dark matter to enlarge her own fictional armament.
However—
"Ah!?"

Lisa cried out in panic.
The spear's outline suddenly distorted then as though melting into the air, the fictional armament disappeared.
Borrowed dark matter ultimately belonged to someone else, hence controlling it was difficult and it would collapse like this immediately if one were to lower their guard for a moment. Hence, it was believed that using dark matter from more than two people was impossible.
When creating anti-dragon weaponry, I had borrowed dark matter from Mitsuki and Iris in the past, but in the actual process of transmutation, what I used was not my own imagination but blueprints downloaded onto my brain. Hence, I did not need to worry about such matters despite using other people's dark matter.
But delicate control was required in the case of Lisa and Ren.
"One more time!"
"Mm!"
Ren nodded in response to Lisa and they formed the giant fictional weapon of a spear again.
The school curriculum also included training on the transmission of dark matter. However, this technique was definitely unstable even with daily practice. Unless for exceptions like me, it would not be used in actual combat.
Nevertheless, there was no alternative but to rely on this technique to perform the attack needed for this operation.
—I had to work hard myself too.
I stopped watching them and returned to my own training.
In this operation, I was not assigned a clear task. Even if I wanted to attack using anti-dragon armaments from the island, the projectile firing Megiddo would get intercepted before the hit connected whereas Babel's supergravitational discontinuity probably could not be fired from outside Basilisk's range.
If there was something I could do, that was providing more options when everyone ran into an emergency. For this purpose, I kept training my control of antigravitational matter.
I raised my fictional armament—Siegfried—which had the appearance of an ornamental gun, then shot three bullets of antigravitational matter that had been adjusted to three different levels.
"Half Gravity."
The bullet fired upwards turned into brightly glittering white particles, falling on me. Then my body instantly felt lighter.
By covering myself with low-density antigravitational matter, I could reduce my weight by half. This technique lasted a long duration and its effects could be adjusted by increasing or decreasing the transmutation mass. In actual combat, this might be the most convenient transmutation to use.
"Gravity Zero."

The next bullet was shot into the ground ten-odd meters away. A sphere of antigravitational matter appeared with a bright white glow. All the pebbles in its surroundings also floated upwards. Then the sphere gradually shrank and when it disappeared, the floating pebbles fell down as well. Although this technique could create a temporary space of weightlessness, it would affect everything in a specific range, hence there were difficulties in using it.

"Antigravity."

The final bullet was transmuted into high-density antigravitational matter. Giving off blindingly bright light like a camera's flash, it caused nearby objects to fly away radially.

I had pretty much mastered the key principles, but I could probably control the Antigravity bullet better. During the battle against Kili, while under Fafnir's control, I was using antigravitational matter with greater skill than right now.

Using the Antigravity bullet with directionality to repel gunfire, distorting space to block attacks—If possible, I wished to reach that level.

The Fafnir that Major Loki had implanted into me and cultivated was a monster existing for *murder*. Hence, its responses were sluggish when fighting dragons instead. In the battle against Hekatonkheir last time, even when I was in a crisis, Fafnir still did not heed my calls. The same would probably happen in the case of Basilisk.

Precisely because of that, I must become adept in using antigravitational matter even my normal state, otherwise it would be pointless.

Since Siegfried disappeared after firing three shots' worth, I exhaled for now and looked around my surroundings. The others were keeping sufficient distance away, engaged in their own training.

Mitsuki, Firill and Ariella were part of the support team to take action if the first attack wave failed. They were practicing nonstop their task of protecting Lisa and Ren while switching to launch the second attack.

Meanwhile, Iris was standing alone at a cliff on the edge of the clearing, raising her Caduceus towards the sea.

Several buoys with red flags were floating on the sea, extending on a cord tied to large rock protruding out of the sea surface.

"—O holy silver, explode!"

Iris caused silver explosions, destroying the buoys one by one. She was carrying out sniping training. Point blank explosions of mithril might possibly be effective against Basilisk.

It was highly likely that lethal damage could be inflicted if she could aim from outside Basilisk's range.

However, aiming required the target to be within view, which meant she must enter Basilisk's line of sight as well. Even if she could be positioned outside Basilisk's range, such a high-risk plan could not possibly be approved.

Hence, Iris was in the same position as me, without any assigned task for now. Even so, because this was the only thing in her ability, she was honing her skills like this.
Currently, she had perfect aim as long as it was within 200 m, but her accuracy would decrease in stages the farther she got. Hence, aiming from outside Basilisk's attack range was probably impossible no matter what.
"O holy silver, explode!"
Just as I was thinking that, a buoy near the rock exploded. Its location was probably close to 1000 m away.
—No, if it's Iris, perhaps it might be possible after all.
I corrected my thought.
Iris always created explosions no matter what she made, hence, by applying that special trait to offense, she had acquired a strong advantage unique to her and no one else.
But what I wondered recently was whether the true nature of Iris' power might be something else?
For example, machines normally broke down when used incorrectly. Hence, perhaps Iris' ability was malfunctioning and causing explosions because her method of usage was incorrect?
If she used it correctly, perhaps something extremely amazing might result.
But this was just baseless fantasy.
Still, watching Iris working hard, I could not help but get this feeling.
—Perhaps Iris might turn out to be an amazing person far surpassing my imagination?
Maybe she noticed my gaze, Iris turned around and waved to me.
"Mononobe! Did you see that just now?"
"Yeah, I saw it!"
Iris asked me loudly and I shouted back.
—It's time I kept my promise to visit her room.
No one could predict what might happen on the battlefield. Anyone could easily lose their life, myself and the others included.
That was how things went on so-called battlefields. One would surely regret not doing things when the chance was available.
"Everyone! It's almost time for lunch!"
At this moment, Tia arrived, flying with her fictional armament, a pair of wings. Skillfully controlling the transmutation of air, she landed on the ground then ran towards me.
"Yuu, Tia helped with lunch today!"
"Then I definitely have to try it. I'm looking forward to it."
"Yeah!"
Tia nodded happily.
While we were training, Tia attended classroom lessons according to a separate timetable and sometimes helped the crew.
Since Tia was Basilisk's target and could not go on the frontline, she was working hard to do what she could do.

No one in Brynhildr Class was wasting their time.
Although under heavy surveillance, I must pay Iris' room a visit before the operation.
I committed this determination of mine firmly in my heart.

Part 5

When Basilisk reached the location two kilometers away from the volcanic island, my chance finally arrived. Since enemy contact would happen within three days at the quickest, everyone participating in the operation were summoned after dinner.
However, since Iris, Tia and I did not have particular tasks, we were excluded from the meeting.
I could not miss this excellent chance, so I left my cabin and made my way to Iris' cabin near the prow end of the ship.
Apart from cabin numbers, the girls' cabins also had their student numbers marked on the doors. B7—Seeing the plate that seemed to read No.7 of Brynhildr Class, I concluded it was probably Iris' cabin.
I tried my best to knock quietly. Then the door opened from the inside. Dressed in school uniform, Iris poked her head out.
"...Eh? Mononobe, what's up?"
"Well—Umm, didn't you invite me to your room last time?"
I scratched my cheek and replied.
"Oh, you still remember! I thought you already forgot!"
Smiling happily, Iris invited me into her cabin. Having lived on this ship for almost a month, Iris had left ample signs of someone living in this cabin. More specifically—It was very messy.
"Oh..."
Noticing pink underwear among the random mess of articles, I could not help but freeze.
"What's wrong—Eh? Ohhh! H-Hold on a sec, I'll tidy things up straight away!"
Blushing to her ears, Iris frantically ran about the cabin, gathering everything on the floor in a pile to create space. Only after making sure her underwear was out of sight, Iris let me into the room.
"S-Sorry about that. Come, sit down."
Iris scratched her head shyly and asked me to sit on the bed.
"It's okay, I've learned a bit more about you as a result, Iris."
"W-What did you learn?"
Sitting down next to me, Iris asked, shaken.
"You're not good at keeping your room tidy, right?"
"Ooh, d-don't say it out, please... Lisa-chan gets mad at me about this often too."

Iris slumped her shoulders dejectedly. I could immediately imagine Lisa lecturing at her to clean up her room.
"Speaking of which, back when I first transferred, you seem to have become closer friends with Lisa better."
"...Yeah, ever since the Leviathan incident, Lisa-chan has been caring for me often, but sometimes I'm scared of her, that's all."
Iris smiled wryly while she replied. Then suddenly thinking of something, she asked me:
"Oh right... I totally didn't notice, but Lisa-chan and Mitsuki-chan got into an argument, right? I heard Firill-chan say that you're working hard to resolve it."
"No really, what I did doesn't count as working hard..."
"It's not resolved yet?"
Seeing Iris with a worried face, I hastily said:
"Yeah, but don't worry. Right now, there's no spare time because of the Basilisk crisis, but I believe things will get settled soon."
Lisa was at the heart of the current operation. She definitely had no time to contemplate her "terms of forgiveness" to demand from Mitsuki.
"I see... That's a relief."
Iris breathed a sigh of relief then reached out to touch my left shoulder.
"...Iris?"
My heart skipped a beat. I called her name quietly.
"Mononobe, you seem to have taken the bandage off... Has the wound stopped hurting?"
"It's okay, the wound is almost fully healed. I can move freely now."
Saying that, I placed my left hand on top of Iris' hand that was touching my shoulder.
"Ah—"
Iris blushed. Seeing her react like that, I felt my heart rate skyrocketing. Our gazes became entangled. There was a sweet yet anxiety-inducing silence, but we did not speak for a while.
"Uh, Iris, what did you intend to tell me originally?"
"U-Umm... Anything at all. What do you wanna know, Mononobe?"
"E-Even if you ask me what I wanna know, I..."
I did not know what to say in response to her question.
"Since it's so rare for us to be alone in a room... You should ask something that you can only confirm only now, right?"
Iris looked up at me and made this suggestion.
"Something that I can only ask now..."
"Yeah..."
Iris nodded. As soon as I met her gaze, I felt as though I was going to be sucked into her eyes, unable to avert my gaze. But her entire being felt so attractive, no matter whether her face, her body, arms or legs. My heartbeat could not calm down at all.
"...Iris, your hair is so pretty."

I finally turned my gaze to her hair then voiced exactly what I thought.
"Thank you... Then go ahead and touch it."
At Iris' urging, I lightly touched her beautiful silver hair.
"So soft, it feels very nice to touch."
"Fufu, I'm so glad that you're touching my head, Mononobe. You're always patting Tia-chan and Ren-chan's heads, I'm so jealous."
Iris remarked a little unhappily.
"Well, it's because Tia and Ren feel like little sisters to me, so I subconsciously... But Iris, your hair isn't something I can touch casually."
"Why?"
"If you ask me why... It's because I'll get nervous."
Hearing my answer, Iris tilted her head and made a surprised look.
"In that case, you're nervous right now?"
"That goes without saying..."
I combed Iris' hair with my fingers and nodded in admission.
Then Mitsuki's face flashed in my mind. I recalled back when I was hospitalized, what she had said to me when we were alone in the sickroom.
—Please handle Iris-san's kiss with upfront honesty, okay?
If I was going to bring that up, now was the only time.
"...Iris, is it really okay for me to accept that kind of thank you reward from you?"
"That kind of thank you reward? What are you talking about?"
"...I-I don't need to spell it out, right? O-Of course I mean the kiss that time."
I listened to my own hoarse voice while explaining to her.
"Eh? Oh—"
Iris' face went red.
"Iris, your reaction implies that you thought of that kiss as special, right?"
Initially, I thought all she wanted to express was gratitude, nothing more, because she had acted too normal. But after knowing she felt conscious about that kiss too, I could not calm my feelings.
"...Right. Although we greet one another with kisses between family, that's on the cheek... A-A kiss on the lips, Mononobe, you're my first..."
Iris replied. She was blushing all the way to her ears.
"For me to be your first... Is that really okay?"
Hearing me ask that, Iris lowered her head and nodded in affirmation.
"If it's you, Mononobe, my second time... can be yours too."
Hearing that, my heart jumped intensely. I could not tear my gaze away from those gorgeous pink lips.
So this really was the case? I was not imagining her favorable impressions of me, Iris actually felt—
My heart rate quickened and my palms grew sweaty.
Then I had no choice but to reply to her seriously. Since Iris had confessed to such an extent, I had to voice my feelings too.

I gulped to moisten my throat that had become parched by the time I noticed.
I inhaled then exhaled.
Then I took a deep breath again and spoke while breathing out:
"Iris, I—"
I made my decision to put my thoughts into words, but Iris looked up in alarm and covered my mouth with her hands.
"N-No! Don't say it out yet!"
"…?"
I asked her with questioning eyes then Iris took her hands off my lips, a wry smile on her face.
"Because… If it's a saddening reply, I will be very depressed. The operation is about to start, if I'm in that kind of state… I won't be able to keep up with the operation in an emergency."
"No, but—"
"Even if it's a gladdening reply, now's not the time either. Because you must fight for Tia-chan's sake next!"
Iris looked at me with serious eyes and persuaded me.
To be honest, I really did not want to drag this on longer, but pressured by Iris' vigor, I could only nod in agreement.
"…Got it. Then let's talk again once Basilisk is taken care of."
"Thank you, Mononobe."
Iris breathed a sigh of relief then thanked me.
"It's just that this kind of dialogue is kind of unlucky on the battlefield…"
"Oh, I know that one! I'm going to get married after the war… That kind of dialogue, right?"
I had no idea where she heard it from, but Iris followed up on the subject I raised.
"Yeah, but I've seen many people on battlefields. In my view, it's not simply a matter of luck."
"What do you mean?"
"The more serious a person's personality or the more reason they have to return, the less they want to use that kind of thing as an excuse. As a result, they will force themselves harder than the others, desperate to survive, which makes them die early, of course."
Hearing my explanation, Iris instantly began to panic.
"D-Don't die, Mononobe! I-If it might make you die, I don't mind canceling our promise from just now!"
"No need to be that worried. Compared to the others, we're safest on standby on the ship."
Indeed, Iris and I were simply watching from the sidelines. If something unexpected happened, perhaps we might come in handy, but the plan's success hinged on that not happening, right?
"R-Right… Okay, in that case, I'll wait for your reply, Mononobe."
"Great."

I nodded clearly as a promise.
There was an increasing number of reasons not to lose, but that was not going to slow me down.

Part 6

Then the time for the decisive battle arrived at last.
It was 11:20am, the sun had risen to its highest point in the sky. Sunlight was shining mercilessly all around.
Everyone was in position. The transport ship had retreated to a position where the volcanic island could be barely seen on the horizon. Iris, Tia and I were at the bridge, watching Shinomiya-sensei issue orders.
Tia staying on the ship was different from the initial plan, but Tia had suggested that if she were on the ship, Basilisk might hesitate against attacking the ship. Based on this reason, the plan was modified.
In other words, Tia was our hostage against Basilisk. We had no idea whether it would work as intended. There was no way of testing it after all, since it would be pointless if Tia lost her life in the experiment.
Even so, Tia's request was accepted, because if she unfortunately got caught up in the attack, at least the worst-case scenario of "a new Basilisk's birth" would be averted.
Lisa and Ren were on the volcanic island, preparing for the attack. Mitsuki, Firill and Ariella were between the volcanic island and the transport ship, on standby while keeping a certain distance from one another. This formation allowed Mitsuki's instantly support Lisa and Ren if anything happened to them.
The backup sent by Midgard had also arrived. They were on standby dozens of kilometers away from the volcanic island. Due to the nature of the operation, sending a large force to the frontline would only add unnecessary risk. That was what Shinomiya-sensei and others apparently decided.
Basilisk was currently twelve kilometers away from the volcanic island. One could probably see its figure from a position over the volcanic island.
As universally known, the Earth is round. Hence, simply by keeping a certain distance, things on the surface would be naturally blocked out of view by the horizon. A person standing on a coast would see no farther than five kilometers. Based on the Basilisk's body size, its visual range was probably ten kilometers or so. If looking out from the volcano's peak, it was probably possible to observe nearby waters within twenty or thirty kilometers.
In other words, we were using natural cover consisting of two things, the volcanic island and the horizon.

A large number of surveillance devices was distributed in the nearby waters. Images from them were displayed on the screen in the bridge. Although seawater along Basilisk's route of advance had turned into salt, surveillance devices would function normally and continued to send data as long as they were not exposed to the red light directly.
"The dragon mark feels so hot..."
Seeing the Basilisk on the monitor, Tia said softly. I could see her pressing her hand against her thigh near the top of her skirt. That was where her dragon mark was located.
Right now, Basilisk had not opened the third eye on its back. It was probably a trump card it used only when cornered. In other words, its attack range was still 5000 m at the moment.
"Don't worry, Tia. The way the situation looks, we'll be able to lure Basilisk to a sufficient distance before attacking. Since it's Lisa we're talking about, she's definitely not going to miss."
I placed my hand on Tia's head and spoke.
What Lisa and Ren were planning to execute was a super long-range sniping attack using the volcano as cover.
With Ren's assistance, she was going to attack Basilisk using a high-powered positron cannon.
Lisa was wearing a pair of goggles, allowing her to perform aiming calculations using data sent by the surveillance devices and therefore snipe through the mountain. Basilisk should not be able to see the attack until it arrived, hence in theory, it should not have time to counterattack.
But even so, just in case, the sniping was to be done from beyond Basilisk's attack range, which was over 10 km with the third eye open and 5 km when shut. Of course, the farther the distance, the harder it was to snipe, hence it was advantageous to us that the third eye was closed.
"B1, B6, execute Plan A. Begin attacking when the target reaches six klicks away."
Shinomiya-sensei issued orders to Lisa and Ren through the communicator.
'Affirmative.'
'Mm.'
Their voices answered.
"I hope they'll succeed..."
Iris closed her eyes and prayed.
Thus, the moment arrived.
"Target at six klicks!"
The crew member serving as the communications officer reported.
"Begin the operation!"
Shinomiya-sensei instantly commanded.
I looked at the screen showing Lisa and Ren's situation. Just as they had practiced many times, they created a giant fictional armament in the shape of a spear.

The spear's tip began to glow brightly. A positron ray gun surpassing modern weaponry was about to appear.
But just before that, the communications officer yelled:
"Basilisk stopped moving! Its back opened up! Third eye gradually popping out!"
No way—It noticed?
I was greatly surprised. Lisa and Ren should not have entered Basilisk's view. Did it sense the massive amount of energy? As soon as the third eye appeared, even the volcanic island had come within its attack range.
A giant eyeball had appeared on Basilisk's back. Supported by muscle fibers, it was thrust outside of its body. Next, that red eyeball aimed forward.
"This is bad—Halt the attack!"
Shinomiya-sensei shouted urgently.
But about to fire, Lisa and Ren were unable to stop the attack immediately. A positronic beam was emitted from the tip of the gigantic fictional weapon of a spear.
Brilliant golden light stabbed into the volcano.
But at the same time, Basilisk's third eye also released red light.
Through the volcano, the gold and red beams were about to collide. But at this rate, the instant, the mountain was punctured, the positronic beam would get erased and the red light would devour Lisa and Ren.
"You two take evasive action immediately! Change to Plan B!"
Shinomiya-sensei rapidly issued orders.
After that—The top of the volcano was turned into dust. Red light streaked across the sky. Even a mountain could not oppose the torrential flow of time, apparently.
The red glow could be seen from the ship's bridge by the naked eye. Shooting out the other end of the volcanic island, the beam traveled straight to the far end of the sky, sweeping away cloud layers along the way.
Several seconds later, the light stopped. What remained where clouds with unnaturally gouged shapes and a volcano with its top half vanished.
The volcano showed a clear-cut cross-section, but after a while, lava flowed out while dense smoke rose into the sky.
"What happened to Lisa and Ren!?"
I shouted. Perhaps hearing my voice, an answer came from the communicator.
'Worry not, we dodged in the nick of time. We will converge with Mitsuki-san immediatly.'
It was Lisa's voice. Hearing her answer, Iris and Tia also showed relieved expressions.
However, Shinomiya-sensei immediately issued orders without relaxing.
"All units return to the ship quickly. Fly at as low an altitude as possible!"

The method of flying using air transmutation could be sped up by flying in formation. After meeting up with Firill and the others, Lisa and Ren should be able to return even faster.
Having blown away the volcano's top half, Basilisk resumed its advance towards Tia behind the volcano. Captured from quite far away, a long-range video showed the Basilisk advancing.
Perhaps finding the lava and smoke ahead of it a hassle, Basilisk shot out two red beams from its eyes. Immediately, the smoke screen vanished while the lava solidified into rock while maintaining its flowing shape.
Solidified unnaturally, the lava was shaped as strangely as avant garde artwork. I was once again confronted with the astounding powers of "Catastrophe." However, something also bugged me.
—It didn't use its third eye just now?
The third eye remained open. If Basilisk found the lava a nuisance, it could have fired a beam from its third eye again. But Basilisk chose to approach the lava first without using its third eye. I felt that there seemed to be some kind of purpose in that.
"...Yuu, the operation failed?"
Tia tugged my clothing worriedly.
"Basilisk noticed the sniping attack and took countermeasures first but we still have the next plan. That's using the initial idea of destroying Basilisk together with the island."
"Then it'll be victory?"
"—Who knows? But there's no other way right now, so all we can do is try our best."
After I answered, I heard Iris, who had been listening on the side, say quietly:
"...We won't be able to enjoy that hot spring again."
"It's a shame but that can't be helped. Okay, Lisa and the others should be back soon. Let's head over to the deck. Starting now, this ship is the frontline."
I grabbed Iris' arm and said. As much as I hated to think this, once this operation failed, everyone, including us, would have no choice but to adapt accordingly.
"Yuu, Tia too—"
"No. When entering Basilisk's attack range, the first to become vulnerable is here, the ship's highest point. As Basilisk's hostage, Tia, you have to stay here to protect the bridge."
I stopped Tia from following.
"...Tia got it. Yuu, do your best!"
Despite showing a look of regret, Tia still cheered for me as she saw me off.
"Okay, I'm off!"
Iris and I left the bridge together, went down the stairs and rapidly made our way to the deck.

The ship had started moving to get away from the island. We went to the deck on the aft.
After waiting there for a while, we saw everyone flying back at low altitude.
"Welcome back!"
Iris waved to welcome everyone. Seeing all of them back safe and sound, she seemed quite happy.
"...I really wished I could reply 'I'm back' cheerfully, but sorry, we failed."
Lisa spoke with chagrin. Ren also went "mm..." and lowered her head.
"That was only because Basilisk's sensory powers seem to be stronger than expected. It is not your fault, Lisa-san and Ren-san. Next—It is my turn."
Mitsuki encourage the disheartened pair then gazed sharply in the volcanic island's direction.
Part of the solidified lava was the only thing barely in view. The island itself was hidden on the other side of the horizon.
"I will use the horizon to hide myself while shooting an extra large missile of antimatter. Since my arrow with fly in a parabolic trajectory, I will be able to shoot at a lower altitude than everyone else. Ren-san... Please lend me your assistance this time."
"Mm!"
Ren agreed and walked over to Mitsuki's side.
"Brionac."
Mitsuki generated her fictional armament of a bow then used air transmutation to hover into the air along with Ren.
She looked like she was going to take aim after rising to a certain height.
Very likely, she was going to attack Basilisk while it was barely sunken on the other side of the horizon.
Although I was clearly receiving essential information on a communicator, I still watched in trepidation.
"Mm."
Ren touched Brionac. Immediately, as for Lisa, the fictional armament enlarged all at once.
Mitsuki raised the iridescent and shining bow, ten-odd times her own height, then nocked an arrow of dark matter, long and thick, commensurate with the bow's size.
Looking up at the scene, Lisa could not help but offer praise.
"—Nothing less expected from Mitsuki-san. She is skillfully controlling the dark matter that Ren-san is handing over to her. Given the scale, Basilisk should disappear together with the island."
Mitsuki pulled the arrow back then yelled:
"Terminating Arrow—Last Quark!"
The arrow of antimatter was shot out, flying like a shooting star streaking across the celestial sphere.
However, the shooting star was devoured by a torrent of red light, flowing in the reverse direction.
"What..."

I could not find any words.
Judging from the light's range and scale, Basilisk had undoubtedly used its third eye to counterattack.
Our attack had been discovered again.
The Basilisk was on the other side of the volcanic island. Although its top half was blown away, the mountain should still restrict Basilisk's field of vision. It could not possibly have captured the antimatter projectile visually.
—To be able to react so swiftly, what on earth was the reason?
The red light passed over us, flying to the far side, but we had no time to space out.
Because the beam was descending.
Piercing clouds, the beam was approaching overhead this time.
It was light a giant red sword swinging down from the sky to the ground.
The instant I witnessed that scene, I reflexively took action.
"Siegfried!"
I created my fictional armament of an ornamental gun in my right hand.
A red beam in the sky descended. After touching the horizon, it was blocked for a while.
This was a natural barrier formed from the Earth's curvature. On the Earth's round surface, there was a limit to distances that could be aimed with straight-line attacks. Exploiting this fact, Mitsuki and Ren had stayed at a height where they would be safe from Basilisk's counterattack in an emergency.
Through the passage of vast amounts of time, the navy-blue sea instantly turned into white salt.
However, the "weathering" did not stop there. The time-stealing produced by the third eye continued, turning the plain of salt into smaller particles, gradually paring it down.
The Earth's curvature was gradually corrected, forcibly expanding Basilisk's attack range. The horizon that we were originally using as our shield was shaved off within the blink of an eye.
—How could such a bastard exist!? Basilisk's power could even alter the Earth's shape?
The sword of red light chopped down while gouging the horizon.
Below it was Mitsuki and Ren. The two of them were descending, but the red beam was faster than them.
—I have to make it in time!
"Antigravity!"
I poured the entirety of my generating capacity into a dark matter bullet, firing it into the air.
The bullet turned into high-density antigravitational matter in front of the red light. Accompanied by a glow of pure white, a powerful repulsive field was generated.
Next to the repulsive field, Mitsuki and Ren were deflected downwards. The spatial distortion bent the trajectory of the red beam.

Thus, the red beam extending upwards ended just like that. Descending, Mitsuki and Ren used the wind around them to land safely.
"—Nii-san, than you. I almost... made Ren-san die together with me."
Mitsuki gnashed her teeth with an expression of chagrin.
"Save your regrets for later! What do we do next!? If that attack just now continued, we will not be able to escape even if we wanted to!"
Lisa urgently asked for Mitsuki's decision.
"...Iris-san, I have a favor to ask of you."
After thinking quietly for several seconds, Mitsuki called out Iris' name.
"W-What is it? Just tell me!"
"Please detonate explosions in the air above the island to rain down mithril. No need to aim precisely. Though they will most likely be intercepted, at least it should buy us some time."
"I-I got it—Caduceus!"
Iris held the fictional armament in her hand and stood on the edge of the aft.
"O holy silver, descend!!"
Iris raised the silver-white staff and yelled. Immediately, silver explosions occurred in the distant sky while countless fragments of mithril fell upon the land.
Basilisk seemed to be within that range. Small flashes of red light could be seen darting around in the sky in complicated movements. Just as Mitsuki said, the mithril would probably be struck down completely. If such a saturation attack worked, NIFL would have chosen this tactic a long time ago.
Iris caused explosions repeatedly while the ship used the opportunity to get away from Basilisk. The distorted horizon of white salt gradually went out of sight.
This was—A retreat in defeat.
Our entire operation ended in failure. We could only flee with our backs to the enemy.
"Ooh..."
Mitsuki bit her lip, her fists clenched tightly, her shoulders trembling slightly.
She was surely full of regret. I suspect that she could not forgive herself for lacking power and for endangering her partner.
Seeing Mitsuki like that, Lisa showed a look of anxiety.
After causing large-scale explosions repeatedly, Iris sat down on the deck, utterly exhausted.
In this heavy atmosphere, no one said a word.
As for me, I quietly left the scene without making a sound.
This was not because I found the mood stifling. Rather, it had occurred to me that there was something I should do—Something only I could do, which was why I was putting it into action.
How could I watch Mitsuki make that kind of look again?

I had sworn to never abandon Mitsuki's happiness, to defeat dragons for this purpose, hence—I could not have any qualms about methods.
Returning to the bridge alone, I sensed a gloomy atmosphere there too.
"Oh, Yuu..."
Tia noticed me and called my name, but I made a beeline for Shinomiya-sensei.
"Shinomiya-sensei."
"Yes... Mononobe Yuu? You reacted smartly there just now. Well done."
It was rare for Shinomiya-sensei to praise me, but her voice lacked her usual vitality. She was probably preoccupied with thinking about their next plan.
"Thanks for the praise, but putting that aside, I've got a request to make, Shinomiya-sensei."
"A request?"
Shinomiya-sensei frowned while I told her my request:
"Yes—Could you let me make a call to NIFL's Major Loki?"

Chapter 4 - Crimson Catastrophe

Part 1

I, Mononobe Mitsuki, have a secret.
It happened two years prior during the Kraken battle.
Confronted with an increase to two Krakens, standing there blankly in shock, I... heard a voice.
—Don't worry, Mitsuki.
It was the voice of my best friend who had just turned into a monster.
Reflected in my eyes were only the two Krakens—each consisting of an ominous purple eyeball with countless writhing tentacles of silver.
Shinomiya Miyako no longer existed in this world... But I heard her voice.
—Calm down, draw your bow, aim.
I felt as though in a dream. There was no sense of reality. Witnessing a scene that I did not wish to admit, half of my thinking had halted.
In that kind of state, I did as the voice instructed. While I was drawing my fictional armament of a bow, the dragon mark under my clothing felt hot as though it were burning.
I even had an illusion as though the heat from my dragon mark was flowing into the arrow I had nocked.
—Okay, shoot! Kill it... Mitsuki!
"Ah..."
The voice escaped my lips with overflowing emotions.
"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!"
I screamed while shooting the arrow. I shot at the monster that had robbed me of my best friend.
Using its tentacles to cover its purple eyeball, the Kraken took on a secure defensive stance.
However, my arrow easily penetrated the silver tentacles, embedding itself into the Kraken's eyeball inside.
Then a blinding flash of light erupted between the tentacles, expanding.
With a giant explosion, the Kraken's core was destroyed. Originally blotting out the sky in the area, the tentacles instantly went limp and fell onto the sea.
Watching that scene, I finally came to my senses.
"This was... my doing?"
I murmured blankly to myself in disbelief.
"Miyako...?"

What was the voice just now? I yelled at the air, but the voice did not answer. Even if I perked up my ears to listen, my ears could not hear my best friend's pleasant voice.
Finally, I looked down at the writhing monster on the sea. The remaining Kraken—the thing that used to be my best friend.
"Was it Miyako!? Did Miyako—"
Did her consciousness remain? I cried out hoarsely, crying out until my throat hurt.
The Kraken's eyeball turned in my direction while the silver tentacles extended with astounding speed.
"What are you doing!?"
Just before the attack struck, Haruka-san knocked me away, saving me.
The voice was my hallucination after all? A miracle of that sort could not possibly happen.
"—Mononobe Mitsuki! Shoot again!"
"Huh...?"
"If it's the attack you used just now, it should be capable of defeatin the remaining Kraken. Only you can do it—So hurry!"
"But... That is Miyako, right?"
I asked in a trembling voice
Even if it no longer had a consciousness, even if it no longer called to me in a gentle voice, even if it was just a monster, it used to be Miyako.
My best friend, Haruaka-san's younger sister, but I had to—
"...No time to hesitate! If you don't hurry and kill it, someone else might turn into a Kraken too!"
"But... But!"
"This is an order! By my will, not yours! I will take full responsibility!"
Tears fell from Haruka-san's eyes.
Then my memories turned blurry.
I remember drawing my bow with trembling hands, aiming with tearful eyes, screaming with unrecognizable words, shooting the arrow.
However, what I was thinking back then, what feelings were in my heart, all this seemed vague and blurry as though they were behind fog.
It was probably my mind's defensive mechanism to maintain my sanity.
Once everything ended, someone hugged me tightly.
I lost consciousness without seeing that person's face, so even now, I had no idea who it was.
For no particular reason, I thought it should be Haruka-san but I had no concrete proof.
However, the bosom covering me was extremely soft and warm, that hand caressing my head was very gentle. Those feelings lingered clearly in my memories.

After waking up in Midgard's infirmary, I was subjected to a hearing.

I explained everything in as much detail as I could possibly recall, but there was one fact that I could not bring up.
—The fact that I had heard Miyako's voice, it was something I could not bring up no matter what.
It was very likely my own hallucination. Also, as soon as something like that was revealed, it would surely turn into an inspiring story.
Everyone would probably spread the rumor like this—Miyako must have entrusted her power to her best friend, Mitsuki, to allow herself to be killed after turning into a Kraken.
I could not tolerate my actions to be beautified like that and forgiven.
I wanted to be condemned. I wanted to suffer.
However, everyone at Midgard was very kind. Smiling, they encouraged me, supported me, forgave me.
Only one person was willing to be angry at me.
The only person to denounce my crime was the girl named Lisa Highwalker.

Part 2

'—I never expected you to call me on your own, 2nd Lieutenant Mononobe. I don't suppose you wish to return to my team, right?'
The man shown on the screen in the bridge narrowed his slender eyes and spoke. He was Loki Jotunheim, my commanding officer back in NIFL, the man who tried to cultivate me into the strongest "killer."
"Impossible. I'm very contented with life in Midgard."
'Oh, then what business do you have with me? I am a very busy man.'
Major Loki hurried me to speak with his gaze.
"You promised me a reward once, right? As for when that happened, I don't quite remember."
I spoke suggestively. Major Loki's eyebrow moved slightly.
It was back when the Leviathan incident had ended, Major Loki had promised me one favor as a reward for setting things smoothly.
Of course, I was lying when I said I could not remember, but our conversation had happened unbeknownst to Midgard. Hence, with Shinomiya-sensei and others present at the bridge, I could not bring up that conversation.
'...Speaking of which, I definitely did promise you. Then what? Have you finally decided what you want?'
After I heard Major Loki's question, I nodded affirmatively.
"Yes—Please give me Mistilteinn."
Upon hearing my request, Major Loki's lips curled with delight.
'Oh... You are referring to the weapon developed by NIFL for taking down Basilisk?'
"That's right, although I don't think it's a mass produced weapon, there should be a prototype. If it's still usable, can you give it to me?"
'Mistilteinn is supposed to be ineffective against Basilisk. Why do you want something like that?'
Major Loki stared at me from the screen and asked me.
"I don't think there's anything wrong with Mistilteinn's design concept. If you hand that weapon over for us to use, I might be able to find a solution."
'You seem to have a plan. But if you're thinking of using that weapon, why not negotiate directly with those in charge of the Mistilteinn operation?'
"It would turn into a situation of Midgard requesting for NIFL's aid, which might result in undue interference, hence I am asking you this as a personal favor, Major Loki."

I met Major Loki's gaze and answered.
'Haha—How cautious. But considering precedents, it's understandable that you may have concerns of that sort. In other words, all you want is for me to act as an intermediary and arrange for NIFL to voluntarily offer Mistilteinn to your side, right?'
"Yes, is it feasible?"
'Having said that I would prepare any reward no matter what, I will try my best. However, I don't guarantee success.'
"That's good enough. Thank you very much."
I bowed and thanked him.
I did not know for sure whether Mistilteinn had a prototype to begin with, hence I did not raise my hopes too much. It was just that obtaining it would be relatively more advantageous.
'You're really working hard, 2nd Lieutenant Mononobe. Do you have things that wish to protect that much?'
"..."
I responded with silence to this sarcastic question. Because for some reason, I felt that answering this question would be extremely dangerous.
'—Whatever, if things go smoothly, NIFL should have a response today. If they don't make a move, you should give up. Goodbye.'
Major Loki smiled at the end and the call disconnected.
Listening to our conversation from the side, Shinomiya-sensei gazed suspiciously at me.
"Mononobe Yuu, what exactly are you..."
"Sorry for doing things my own way, Shinomiya-sensei, can I trouble you to gather everyone? I'll explain then."
I apologized to Shinomiya-sensei and asked her.
Although it was unknown whether Mistilteinn would be given to us, I had things to tell everyone.
Basilisk could very well have *an opening to exploit*.
This was the only solution I had discovered during our failed operation.

Part 3

"I believe that NIFL's plan of attack was the most effective against Basilisk."
In front of everyone gathered in the conference room, that was my opening line.
"What Mistilteinn lacked was a mithril shield enough to last through 'Catastrophe.' Conversely, as long as we reinforce it on this point, Mistilteinn will become a weapon capable of defeating Basilisk."
After I spoke in a strong tone of voice, Lisa immediately interjected.
"Hold it right there, Mononobe Yuu. Although that may be true in theory, Basilisk is capable of weathering even mithril instantly once it opens its third eye. Didn't NIFL give up precisely because they concluded that no amount of mithril would be enough?"
Lisa was right. If simply increasing the amount of mithril would be enough, NIFL should have mass produced Mistilteinn and deployed the bombs consecutively. NIFL did not do that because the amount of mithril required was beyond what could be achieved in practice.
"That's right. Assuming Basilisk could fire its third eye's beam repeatedly, then it would easily eliminate a mithril shield no matter how thick it was. But I believe that Basilisk has a limit."
"...What do you mean by that?"
"Including the NIFL operation, Basilisk has fired beams from its third eye thrice so far. Before this meeting, I asked someone to check and in all cases, the beam lasted approximately five seconds. Also, on the two occasions during our operation, it would clearly be advantageous for Basilisk to fire consecutive beams but it did not do so."
Hearing me say that, Mitsuki brought her hand to the side of her mouth and murmurmed:
"—Indeed, that did bother me. Is there some kind of reason why Basilisk must conserve its usage of the third eye...?"
"Normally speaking, it's due to risk, right? If there's no risk, then it would use it as much as possible without needing to hide it."
"Risk... Nii-san, you seem to have some kind of hypothesis."
Staring at my face, Mitsuki urged me to explain.
"I guess. There is a limit to the amount of dark matter we can generate each time. In the same vein, the total amount of red light that Basilisk can shoot out—or perhaps the amount of time stolen—might have a limit too."

"...It is possible. Come to think of it, this could explain why Basilisk cannot fire in succession. Perhaps the beam duration is fixed because its strength cannot be adjusted..."
"Right, the third eye probably cannot make fine adjustments. After releasing the total amount, there will be a five-second shortage of energy. I'm guessing that's the kind of trump card it is."
After listening to the explanation so far, Iris asked me:
"Then after the third eye attacks, Basilisk is in a vulnerable state? Then it can be defeated easily?"
"—Things would be a breeze if that were so, but what I just said only applies to the third eye alone. It's best to assume that Basilisk can still use its regular pair of eyes to attack normally. In fact, Basilisk managed to intercept your rain of mithril shards, didn't it?"
"Oh right... Then what do we do?"
Iris cocked her head and asked.
"That's exactly why we need Mistilteinn. That weapon was designed to withstand normal exposure to 'Catastrophe.' By adding more mithril to its shield, to allow it to survive the five seconds of exposure to the third eye's beam, it should be possible to strike Basilisk in theory."
I explained the possibility I had pictured in my mind.
"...I essentially understood what you are trying to convey, Nii-san. In other words, the insufficient mithril will be supplied through Ds' transmutations, right?"
Mitsuki asked me as though confirming.
"You got it. I believe this is the most practical plan."
"It still is not comprehensive enough to call practical. Also, it does not take in account the abnormal sensing abilities displayed by Basilisk this time. However, I believe your plan is certainly worth discussing."
Saying that, Mitsuki turned her gaze to Shinomiya-sensei.
"—I agree. Although the situation would change more or less depending on whether NIFL hands Mistilteinn over, we will devise a new battle plan based on this direction."
Hearing Shinomiya-sensei say that, Mitsuki nodded in agreement then announced to everyone:
"Then we shall adjourn for the time being. Please rest properly until you are notified of the operation, everyone."
Despite saying that, Mitsuki did not seem like she was planning to rest. Immediately, she was going to start discussing with Shinomiya-sensei. However, she looked more cheerful than just now. Compared to helpless despair, things probably felt a lot easier when there was room to work hard despite difficulties.
—I really hope she won't force herself too much.
Looking at the side of Mitsuki's face, I worried for her. But it was several hours later when I finally came to understand that Mitsuki's unease was far worse than I imagined.

Part 4

The elderly man with a scar on his forehead—Major-General Dylan on the screen—smiled gently at Tia.
'This is Uncle's gift to you, so please accept it.'
That evening—Mistelteinn's handover went surprisingly smoothly.
Apparently, Major-General Dylan had gone great lengths with outstanding initiative, even providing as a bonus gift a transport aircraft capable of taking Mistilteinn high into the sky.
"Thank you, Uncle!"
Tia smiled radiantly and thanked him. Hearing Tia's response, Major-General Dylan grinned, unable to close his mouth. But after noticing my gaze from the side, he coughed.
'Ahem—There are no more backup Mistilteinns, this is the last one. I hope you will use it well. If NIFL's weapon could contribute towards Basilisk's defeat, it would redeem our honor a little.'
Major-General Dylan resumed a serious expression then disconnected after he finished talking.
Although I had no idea what exactly Major Loki had done, I got the sense that Major-General Dylan had handed Mistilteinn to us without any strings attached despite knowing clearly that my side wanted the weapon.
It was probably thanks to Tia.
"You helped a lot, Tia."
"Eh? But Tia didn't do anything?"
Tia widened her eyes in surprise but as soon as I stroked her head, she instantly closed her eyes partially in pleasure.
Thus, we were off to what could be considered a smooth start. However, problems started in the strategy meeting afterwards.
"Are you serious in what you said just now?"
Lisa's angry voice resounded inside the conference room. Standing in front of the screen showing all sorts of data, Mitsuki took on Lisa's gaze without evading at all.
"Yes, of course I am serious. I have decided—*to descend together with Mistilteinn*."
This was equally unbelievable for me. Everyone else was staring blankly at Mitsuki.
"Why are you doing this? It is far too reckless!"
Lisa slammed the table and suddenly stood up.

"If you do not understand, I shall explain again. According to calculations, it is possible to reinforce the mithril to withstand the third eye's beam. However, the warhead will become too large, rendering the original descent control system ineffective. Hence, someone needs to descend together with Mistilteinn to apply trajectory corrections."
"That is not what I am asking! I am asking why do you need to take on this task alone, Mitsuki-san!"
"Since the plan is formulated using a unfounded hypothesis, it is possible that our predictions are wrong. In the event of failure, certain death presumably awaits. Hence, I cannot push such a dangerous job onto others."
"..."
Lisa gnashed her teeth and approached Mitsuki angrily and rapidly.
Smack—A crisp sound was heard. Lisa had slapped Mitsuki in the face.
"Why are you always like this... I will not approve of this!"
"...It does not matter if you do not approve, because I am the Counter-Dragon Squad's captain."
Despite the red mark on her cheek from the slap, Mitsuki still glared at Lisa squarely.
"Wait."
Firill interrupted.
"...If someone has to go, I'll do it."
"What—N-No way! This is something I must do!"
"...Wrong, considering the event of failure, I'm more suitable than you, Mitsuki. You are both the student council president and the Counter-Dragon Squad captain, but I'm just an ordinary student."
Firill shook her head and refuted Mitsuki's claim.
"If that's the case, letting me do it is fine too, right?"
Ariella stood up slowly and smiled mischievously at Mitsuki.
"Mm!"
Ren stood up as well as though saying it was the same for her.
"Oh, me too!"
Looking at her classmates, even Iris frantically got up.
"Iris-san, you cannot even fly. You have no way of controlling Mistilteinn at all, do you!?"
Mitsuki frantically pointed it out but Iris refuted her while showing a serious expression:
"That's definitely true, but I can't let anyone go alone! No matter who ends up going, I have to go along! And maybe I might be able to help in some way!"
—As expected of Iris.
She completely ignored the necessary requirement. However, what Iris said was correct in a certain sense.
"Although I won't be able to control Mistilteinn either, I volunteer myself to be part of the descent team. Precisely because it's a plan based on a

hypothesis, that's why we have to anticipate all kinds of situations and think of countermeasures. Iris and I will definitely come in handy, you know?"
I stood up from my seat and said to Mitsuki.
"That is..."
Mitsuki was speechless. In the previous operation, it was thanks to Iris and my abilities that we were able to keep out of harm's way, hence she could not find any words to refute us.
"You do say some decent things on occasion, Mononobe Yuu."
Seeing all members of Brynhildr Class standing up, Lisa showed a smile on the corners of her lips.
"Mitsuki-san, I have made my decision."
"By decision... What have you decided? Lisa-san, you do not have the authority to decide on the plan, you know?"
Seeing Mitsuki's wary gaze, Lisa smiled wryly and replied:
"No, what I have decided is the method for you to settle your crime from two years ago."
"What—Why are you bringing that up now..."
Probably unprepared to hear this, Mitsuki reacted very awkwardly to the unexpected words.
"Naturally, because it is related to the current situation. What I demand of you, Mitsuki-san—"
Pointing her finger at Mitsuki, Lisa told her in an acute tone of voice:
"Including me, I want you to make full use of all manpower that had just volunteered for the operation, and come up with a perfect plan that could handle all unexpected situations! Furthermore, everyone must survive! So long as you accomplish this, I will forgive you, Mitsuki-san!"
"How on earth... The risk is too great with everyone together—"
"I will not force you. If you cannot think of a new plan, then have someone apart from yourself descend with Mistilteinn. Do you agree, Shinomiya-sensei?"
Shinomiya-sensei had her arms crossed before her chest, a troubled expression on her face. But after hearing Lisa's question, she nodded gravely.
"...Since there are other volunteers, as the commander, I have no choice but to make such a decision. The captain has other responsibilities. However, if there is no better plan, I cannot allow multiple people to be part of the descent."
Shinomiya-sensei's answer was very logical. Mitsuki looked like she had no counterarguments. She bit her lip and lowered her head.
"Understood? Mitsuki-san? If you don't want a classmate to head towards death alone—If you truly wish to protect your family to the very end, rack your brain as hard as you can. Find a path that will allow everyone to return alive..."
Lisa's demand was very harsh. Compared to shouldering all her comrades' lives, it would probably be easier to face Basilisk alone.

Lisa had said that she would come up with a very difficult condition. To Mitsuki, there was probably no harsher demand than this.
However, Mitsuki was cornered.
She clenched her fist and replied in a trembling voice:
"...I will try. Give me some time."
After saying that, Mitsuki rapidly left the conference room. As though praying, Lisa silently watched the frail-looking silhouette of her back—

Part 5

Our transport ship retreated back to behind Midgard's first defensive line. Here, we met up with NIFL's large transport vessel that was carrying Mistilteinn.
There was nothing for me to do until Mitsuki called for another meeting, so I spent time in my cabin, restless and uneasy.
—Will Mitsuki be fine?
Lying on the bed, I worried about my younger sister. I had already lost count of how many times I wanted to check up on her, but I managed to suppress the urge every time.
I would only get in her way if I went. There was nothing I could help out with.
Just as I was persuading myself, I heard a knock at my door.
"...Who is it?"
I frowned and went to the door. Opening it, I found Mitsuki standing there with a haggard face.
"Nii-san—May I talk to you for a while?"
"Y-Yeah..."
I nodded and invited Mitsuki into my cabin.
Sitting on the inner bed, Mitsuki sighed deeply.
"Hoo... This is really not going well."
"It's really hard to come up with a new plan, right?"
I sat down on the outer bed, facing Mitsuki, and asked her hesitantly.
"No, the new plan is already drafted. It is just that even so, I still petitioned everyone one by one, hoping they could withdraw from volunteering."
"The plan is already drafted huh? As expected of you, Mitsuki. But by this point, no one will withdraw, right?"
I recognized Mitsuki's excellence again and replied to her.
"Right... I already visited Firill-san and the others in their cabins, but no one agreed."
"—So you came to me last? Just to get it out of the way, I've no intention of backing out of this operation, okay?"
I guessed Mitsuki's intention in visiting me and clarified beforehand. On the other hand, Mitsuki glared resentfully at me.
"I was hoping that you of all people would listen to my request at least, Nii-san..."

"Don't ask for the impossible. If you're going to descend alone, Mitsuki, I'll have to stop you no matter what—Or make a huge fuss and insist I go along with you."
Hearing me assert that, Mitsuki exhaled helplessly.
"You are so willful, Nii-san."
"You're in no position to criticize me on that."
I retorted sarcastically.
"No helping it, I understand—I will protect you, Nii-san."
Mitsuki stood up from the bed then approached with an expression of resolve on her face, hugging me from the front.
"M-Mitsuki?"
Feeling Mitsuki's body warmth and the beating of her heart, I grew flustered.
"I absolutely will not allow you to die, Nii-san."
However, upon hearing Mitsuki's quiet whispering in my ear, the blood rushing to my brain calmed down. Mitsuki had probably vowed the same for the others.
However—This alone was not enough.
I wrapped my arms around Mitsuki's back and actively gave her a tight hug.
"Kyah!? N-Nii-san?"
"I think you probably know... By everyone surviving, that includes you too, Mitsuki, so I will protect you."
"W-Wrong! I will be the one to protect you, Nii-san!"
"No, I will protect you."
We argued like that but of course, there was no end to it.
"...Good grief, do whatever you wish, Nii-san. This is uncomfortable... Could you release me?"
Having decided it was pointless to argue any further, she pushed against my chest. Perhaps because it was hard to breathe, her face was especially red.
"Sorry, I used too much force."
I apologized and released her. With her face red, Mitsuki shook her head slightly then turned her back to me.

"Yes, it hurt a little. A man... is stronger after all."
Mitsuki looked back with a wry smile. For some reason, her words and the facial expression were making my heart rate accelerate.
Or perhaps it was because her using the word "man" strayed a bit from a brother-sister relationship.
"...I will take more care next time."
"Next time? You plan on hugging me again?"
"No, that's not what I meant—"
I hastily tried to explain but Mitsuki interrupted me and laughed.
"Fufu, I understand. It was just a joke. So, Nii-san, let us get moving. I will summon the others next."
Saying that, Mitsuki extended her hand to me. Her gaze showed cheerfulness as though all her troubles had been swept away.
This was probably resilience arising from the resolve to protect everyone, something one could not acquire from solitarily clinging to martyr-like feelings.
That was the earnest gaze of someone whose goal was to return alive—

Part 6

The next day at 7am, we were in the sky at an altitude of 15000 m.
From this height, one could tell that the Earth was round. This was a realm overlooking the clouds.
We were standing on a silver-colored gigantic weapon. Mistilteinn—made using mithril, the large bomb developed to take down Basilisk.
In our surroundings were other girls from the Counter-Dragon Squad who had converged as the support team. They flying here and there, busy with their work.
Using the transmutation of air to control wind they kept Mistilteinn hovering in the air while working to thicken the mithril armor at the bottom.
We initially asked NIFL's transport aircraft to pull Mistilteinn up to this height, but after transferring the task to the Ds, they retreated, because Mistilteinn's weight was no longer within the aircraft's load bearing limit.
To conserve their energy as part of the descent team, the members of Brynhildr Class were on standby on top of Mistilteinn, waiting for preparations to complete.
Normally speaking, this was an altitude where it was difficult to breathe and the temperature was below zero degrees Celsius, but the surrounding wind was very warm and had sufficient oxygen, so there were no problems with cold or breathing.
Tia had also joined in the ranks of creating wind, because she wanted to contribute her part, coming along in a partially forced manner.
However, she could not descend together with us because the risk of dragonification increased if she went near Basilisk. Even if we ended up defeating Basilisk, our operation would be a failure if we lost Tia.
Hence, after the preparatory work ended, Tia would need to leave with the other members of the Counter-Dragon Squad.
I looked up at Tia who kept transmuting air with her wing-shaped fictional armament which was glowing red.
Our surroundings was almost wind-less. This was evidence that Tia and the others were definitely controlling the wind.
"—Now for final confirmations before the operation."
Mitsuki spoke after sweeping her gaze at each one of us in turn. Pushing her goggles up to her forehead, she was wearing a small communicator.
Her attire exuded a sense of solemnity as befitted the captain of the Counter-Dragon Squad.

"Firill-san and I will be in charge of controlling Mistilteinn's descent. Trajectory adjustment will be very difficult once Catastrophe's attack connects. Using the data sent from surveillance devices, we must maintain our position above Basilisk at all times."
Mitsuki turned her gaze to Firill, who was wearing the same kind of goggles as her. The same equipment as what Lisa had used to snipe Basilisk, this allowed them to capture the position of a target outside of visual contact.
"...Yes, no problem. Precise control is my specialty."
Firill nodded firmly and forcefully in response, clenching her fist before her voluptuous bosom.
"If the operation goes smoothly, I predict Basilisk will take evasive action. We will control Mistilteinn's descent until the moment before it strikes, withdrawing five seconds before impact. But with this timing, escaping the explosion would be impossible, hence, Ariella-san, plase deploy multiple physical barriers."
"Leave it to me. I am everyone's shield."
Ariella thumped her chest and accepted the task.
"Lisa-san and Ren-san, please cooperate with Firill-san and I to devote our full effort to creating a barrier of air. With this, we should be able to defend from the explosion. Also, I leave the handling of unexpected developments to you two."
Mitsuki looked at Lisa and Ren seriously then continued:
"By that, I am referring to the case of the third eye's beam exceeding five seconds. If it persists beyond five seconds, follow Plan A. If a second shot is fired, please counter with Plan B."
This was the most important task with everyone's fate on the line. Any error in judgment and all would be lost.
"Mm."
Ren nodded affirmatively.
"—Understood. I shall accomplish my task lawlessly. Mitsuki-san, I hope that your plan will meet my expectations."
Lisa stared into Mitsuki's eyes and answered with a challenging tone.
"Very well, please believe in me."
Mitsuki was not intimidated by Lisa and answered with firm resolve. Seeing her expression, a smile surface on the corners of Lisa's lips.
"Finally, there is Nii-san and Iris-san. Your responsibilities will change greatly depending on the situation. Have you memorized all the patterns with certainty?"
"Y-Yes! Sure thing, probably!"
Iris answered hoarsely while Mitsuki showed worry on her face.
"The moment you say 'probably,' it is no longer a sure thing..."
"Ooh... U-Umm..."
Seeing Iris panicking, I helped her out.
"It's okay. Iris' and my jobs are to team up. I will definitely guide my partner."

"Mononobe.."
Iris looked at me with eyes of gratitude.
"...Well then, Nii-san, please look after Iris-san, your partner."
I could somehow sense some displeasure in Mitsuki's answer.
Then Mitsuki received a report through her communicator. I could hear faint voices from it.
'Team A reporting. All tasks complete.'
'Team B finished as well.'
"—Thank you for your hard work. Please move on to the next process."
Mitsuki issued orders then looked at our faces and said:
"Mistilteinn's fortification is completed. The operation will begin soon."
We all nodded in acknowledgement with tense faces. Then Tia came over to us. She had probably asked members of the team who had finished with mithril reinforcement to take her spot.
"Yuu, everyone!"
Tia landed on Mistleteinn and looked up at us with a worried face.
"Then it's time for us to get going."
I touched Tia's head and said.
"Yuu... You guys will surely come back, right?"
"Yeah, I promise you, we'll definitely come back alive. All of us."
After I answered, Lisa immediately added one more sentence.
"Naturally, we will also defeat Basilisk, so just wait without worrying."
"...Yeah, Tia knows. Tia will cheer for you all! Tia will cheer very very hard! So—Do your best!"
With moistened eyes, Tia shouted loudly.
I instantly felt a flame of motivation burning in my heart. If it was now, I felt that I was able to do anything.
Basilisk had set its eyes on this gentle girl, wanting to obtain her, but I absolutely refused to hand her over.
This was different from the sense of omnipotence when Fafnir awakened.
Feeling the strong power driving myself, I said to Tia:
"Leave it to us. We'll help you reject Basilisk."

Mitsuki and Firill took over Mistilteinn's control, then the Counter-Dragon Squad members not involved in the descent operation departed from this airspace. Tia was among them, waving at us while gradually receding in the distance.
Then the descent operation began. Falling towards the Basilisk 15000 meters below.
It felt like taking an elevator in a skyscraper, a sudden onslaught of a hovering sensation as though all your innards were floating up. Since we were surrounded by the air created by Mitsuki and the others, I did not feel the ringing in my ears caused by air pressure changes.

"—Currently at 14000 m. Basilisk is moving towards Midgard where Tia-san and the others are taking refuge. Correcting Mistilteinn's trajectory."
Wearing a pair of goggles, holding her fictional armament of a bow, Mitsuki reported the situation to us.
Basilisk's attack range was normally 5000 m but reached 10000 m when the third eye opened. As soon as our altitude went below 10000 m, we could get attacked any time.
"...Passed 12000 m. Basilisk stopped moving and has apparently entered a stance to counterattack Mistilteinn."
Holding her book-shaped fictional armament, Firill read out the information transmitted to her goggles in a calm voice.
Lisa and Ariella generated their fictional armaments as a precaution against changes in the situation. Ren leaned against Lisa while Iris silently held my hand. Iris' hand was sweating from nervousness and I gripped her hand tightly in response, waiting for the time to take action.
"About to reach altitude of 10000 m, from here on, we are within Basilisk's attack range—"
Before Mitsuki finished her sentence, the situation changed.
Suddenly, the rate of falling decreased dramatically while red particles rose around Mistilteinn.
—So suddenly!?"
"The third eye is attacking! Keep some distance from Mistilteinn!"
While rapidly reporting the situation, Mitsuki floated up lightly. Mitsuki and Firill generated wind to make everyone hover.
"Wawa!?"
Well-versed in flying skills, Lisa and the others were unfazed but Iris was in a panic due to losing balance. Unused to the sensation, I also felt a little troubled while I looked down at Mistilteinn, gradually getting farther away from us.
Since Mistilteinn was acting as a shield, the red light did not reach us.
But if it persisted for more than five seconds, that would be a different matter. As though praying, we listened to Mitsuki's counting.
"...Three, four, five—"
At almost exactly five seconds, the red phosphorescence in Mistilteinn's surroundings vanished. Since the resetting of kinetic energy was gone, Mistilteinn's falling speed began to accelerate again. Mitsuki and Firill used wind again to control Mistilteinn's movement and conduct trajectory adjustments.
"Thank goodness... Looks like it's the same as predicted."
Ariella breathed a sigh of relief.
"No—getting attacked by the third eye right off the bat cannot be considered the same as predicted. In the ideal case, I originally hoped that Basilisk would attack like last time, below 5000 m. Lisa-san, please take watch out for the third eye's second attack."
Mitsuki shook her head with a worried expression.

"Understood. It might have used the third eye to attack at the start so as to secure more time to recharge its energy for a second shot. Ren-san, Plan B on standby."
"Mm."
Lisa lifted Gungnir and aimed it downwards whereas Ren placed her hand on the spear. Immediately, as in the previous battle, Lisa's fictional armament grew in size.
Maintaining that state, Lisa stared at the still-intact Mistilteinn.
"If Mistilteinn is breached, we will serve as the second spear!"
"Mm!"
Ren nodded firmly after listening to Lisa.
"—We will presently reach 5000 m. Basilisk will probably fire the normal 'Catastrophe' from its pair of eyes to attack!"
Mitsuki urged us to pay attention. Just as she predicted, Mistilteinn's speed slowed down greatly again. Adjusting our relative speed, Mitsuki and Firill kept our distance from Mistilteinn.
Although red light could be seen faintly, the color was much more dilute than earlier. Mistilteinn was enough to defend.
At this rate, Mistilteinn would probably strike Basilisk directly. Unlike Leviathan with its absolute defense, Basilisk should be possible to defeat as long as it hits.
But there was one more factor that prevented optimism. The strange sensory powers displayed by Basilisk last time. Last night when explaining the operation to us, Mitsuki had said the following regarding that—
That power might be precognition rather than sensing.
Indeed, Basilisk was using a power that interfered with time. Causing weathering in objects within its view was, in a certain sense, looking into the future.
Looking into the future—Suppose this speculation was correct, it was no wonder that traps like land mines were useless.
But even with such a cheating power, there were still openings to exploit. The future was not fixed and could easily change due to actions taken. Basilisk itself was using action to evade danger.
And based on the previous time, it noticed Lisa and Mitsuki's attacks only after my side had taken action.
"Altitude 2000 m! Basilisk showing no signs of taking evasive action! If this was its decision after looking into the future, the third eye could very well fire its second shot! It is highly probable that Basilisk predicts that the next attack will destroy us!"
Mitsuki reported rapidly. Her words probably sounded like dialogue of despair, but this plan was actually devised by predicting and assuming this situation.
After reinforcement, Mistilteinn could withstand the third eye's weathering duration for roughly nine seconds. In other words, it would break down

right at the end of the second shot. This was precisely the trap we had laid for Basilisk.
"Altitude 1000 m—! The second wave is coming! Ariella-san, deploy multiple barriers! Lisa-san, start Plan B!"
"Got it!"
"Understood!"
Looking down at the red light expanding all at once, Ariella and Lisa answered respectively.
"Barrier, five-fold deployment!"
Ariella brandished her gauntlet-shaped fictional armament, Aegis, producing a giant shield with as many as five layers between Mistilteinn and us.
"Transform, spear of holy silver!!"
Using Ren's power, Lisa used transmutation to turn the tip of the enlarged Gungir into mithril.
In that instant, the future seen by Basilisk very likely changed.
Although there was no concrete proof, there was circumstantial evidence that backed such speculation.
The flow of time caused by "Catastrophe" was akin to physical simulation, nothing more than a mechanical change based on the current state and conditions, turning into an appearance later in time. For example, it would not take into account factors like a bird removing a target object from the scene.
If looking into the future was based on the power of "Catastrophe," then it would not take into account the actions caused by unpredictable factors like living creatures.
In other words, only now did Basilisk realize the threat to its life.
The distance was less than 1000 m now. Even if it could look into the future, its choice of action was still limited.
"—Mistilteinn destroyed! Ariella-san's shield is also breached! Lisa-san, please endure!"
"This is more than enough!"
The spear's tip of mithril blocked the red light then just as Lisa declared, it endured successfully against the remaining less than a second of the giant beam of light. Then Mitsuki shouted:
"Third eye, stopped! Basilisk is taking evasive action!"
Perhaps seeing the future of itself getting skewered, Basilisk stopped attacking with "Catastrophe" and started moving.
"...It's too late to escape now."
Firill declared forcefully.
"Lisa-san, please launch the spear! We will correct its trajectory!"
Hearing Mitsuki, Lisa nodded. Transmuting the spear's shaft into mithril as well, she launched the gigantic spear.
"—Pierce!"
Then chasing after the accelerated spear, we descended as well.

"Iris, it's almost our turn. You know what to do, right?"
I said to Iris beside me.
"Yeah, no problem, I know!"
Saying that, Iris generated her fictional armament of a staff.
I was also holding Siegfried in my right hand, estimating my timing. If I missed, all would be for nothing, hence failure was absolutely not an option.
"Three seconds away from target———Impact!"
Accompanied by Mitsuki's voice, the gigantic silver spear stabbed into the white ocean that had been turned into salt.
With a giant crash that shook the atmosphere, a cloud of salt dust rose.
Unlike NIFL's Mistilteinn, Lisa's spear did not carry explosives and would not explode. Once evaded, it would not inflict a lethal wound, of course.
Crawling out—Basilisk could be seen emerging from the spear's shadow.
Perhaps it managed to dodge in the nick of time by looking into the future.
Immediately, with a red flash, light shot out from its two eyes to deprive us of time.
But having confirmed Basilisk's survival, I had already shot my bullet.
Pouring my total generating capacity into it, I warped space as much as I could.
"Antigravity!"
The white glow caused a localized repulsive field, deflecting the red light's trajectory.
Still, the Antigravity bullet's effect only lasted an instant. Our situation would only worsen even if we kept trying to create shields.
Nevertheless, we no longer needed to defend anymore.
An instant was all it took. By securing enough time for Iris to capture Basilisk in her sights, my mission was already accomplished.
Basilisk was roughly 200 meters away.
Iris would never miss at this distance.
"O holy silver, explode!"
Raising Caduceus, Iris cried out.
Immediately, a silver explosion detonated in front of Basilisk.
The noise from the explosion of sharp metal shook my ears, hurting my eardrums slightly.
The point blank explosion was impossible to dodge, it was too late even if it could predict the future. The exploding mithril shrapnel struck Basilisk all over its body.
Giiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii!
That was probably Basilisk screaming. I heard a coarse and ear-splitting noise reverberate throughout the surroundings.
"O holy silver—Explode! Explode! Explode!"
Iris kept moving her hands, attacking mercilessly.
Basilisk's eyeballs were completely destroyed during the first stage of the attack. It was no longer capable of attacking with "Catastrophe."

Basilisk curled its body up like an armadillo, trying to hold out against the explosions, but the tough mithril shrapnel easily penetrated the scales of diamond.
But just at this moment, curled into a ball, Basilisk suddenly contracted its body slightly.
Just as I had a bad feeling, the stone pillar-like diamonds on its body suddenly flew apart violently in all directions.
"—It still has this kind of secret move!?"
Seeing the sharp blocks of diamond attack like shotgun pellets, Mitsuki cried out in surprise.
"Don't worry! Leave it to me!"
The incoming diamonds were deflected by Ariella's shield. But having abandoned its heavy outer shell of diamond, Basilisk was starting to burrow into the desert of salt with nimble movements.
"I am not letting you escape—O flare, pierce!"
Iris was panting heavily from the repeated transmutations. Taking her place, Lisa unleashed a torrent of light from her fictional armament of a gigantic spear. This was a maximum-scale positron cannon produced with the help of Ren's dark matter.
I generated Siegfried again and attacked almost simultaneously with Lisa.
"Plasma Bullet!"
This was the transmutation I had used during the test for simulating combat against Basilisk, a technique using plasmafied compressed air to attack. Initially, I only succeeded occasionally, but after practicing relentlessly, I finally mastered the technique.
My Plasma Bullet pierced Basilisk's head accurately from the air, while Lisa's positron cannon blasted a large hole in the center of its body.
Basilisk shook and lost balance, then collapsed on the mountain of salt that had piled up when it was trying to burrow.
Keeping sufficient distance from Basilisk, we landed on the sea surface that had been turned to salt.
"Approach the enemy in formation! Deliver the fatal blow!"
We followed Mitsuki's orders and entered the formation decided during the strategy meeting.
Taking on the role of defense, Ariella, Firill and Lisa were stationed separately on the edges with Mitsuki and me standing in the middle. Furthermore, I had Iris by my side while Mitsuki had Ren.
This formation allowed us to guard against hostile attacks while exterminating the enemy with maximum firepower.
"—Iris."
"Yes!"
I extended my left hand and Iris gripped it tightly with her right hand.
"Anti-dragon armament—Marduk!"
Using the dark matter borrowed from Iris, I constructed a weapon from a lost civilization.

The giant cannon had interior machinery exposed all over the place. It moved according to my will and aimed for Basilisk. On this sea that had been turned into salt, I had a stable foothold.
"Ren-san, I am counting on you."
"Mm."
Then Mitsuki borrowed Ren's dark matter to enlarge her own fictional armament.
Despite having its head and body pierced, Basilisk was still moving its limbs clumsily, struggling as though trying to burrow into the salt and escape.
This vitality was extraordinary. It might very well revive if we did not seize this chance to defeat it completely.
"Mitsuki-san, this time... you must succeed in protecting everything!"
Facing forward, Lisa cried out without looking back.
"—Yes!"
Nodding firmly and vigorously, Mitsuki nocked the arrow of dark matter on Brionac.
Then we launched the final attack against the brutal dragon of red.
"Special artillery, Megiddo—Fire!!"
"Terminating Arrow—Last Quark!!"
My cannon shot out a blue projectile of light while Mitsuki fired an arrow of antimatter, both striking Basilisk's body.
The blue flash and the blinding white light of annihilation temporarily altered the colors of the world.
Basilisk's gigantic body was swallowed in the light, returning to nothingness.
Although the blast swept salt and dust in our direction, the barrier of air deployed by Lisa and the others caused the white wave to fly past as though avoiding us.
Finally, a large hole was left in the plain of salt. However, the explosion had apparently punctured the layer of salt. Seawater was gradually flowing out from inside, forming a perfectly circular puddle.
For a moment, no one spoke.
Staring at the hole filled with seawater, Mitsuki finally exhaled quietly.
"Phew..."
Releasing her fictional armament of a bow, Mitsuki looked up at hte clear blue sky.
Lisa slowly walked over to Mitsuki and stood beside her.
"It disappeared so cleanly, leaving not a single trace behind."
"Yes..."
Mitsuki concurred weakly.
"And everyone survived. Not a single person missing. Thus—You have fulfilled my condition."
"...Are you willing to forgive me?"
"Of course, I always keep my word."

Lisa reassured her with a pleasant expression but Mitsuki asked while staring into the distance:
"Is it that easy to let go? If you are forcing yourself—"
"I am not forcing myself at all. Goodness gracious, Mitsuki-san, you never change."
Arms akimbo, Lisa sighed in exasperation.
"But..."
Mitsuki lowered her head with an expression as though she could not accept this.
"Ahhh, I cannot bear the sight of this any longer..."
Lisa scratched her head impatiently and forcibly embraced Mitsuki.
"Mmmph!"
Finding her face pressed against Lisa's massive bust, Mitsuki moaned uncomfortably.
"Mitsuki-san, you have done plenty enough already. I respect someone like you from the bottom of my heart. As friends, I am proud of you. As family... I feel that you are extremely endearing."
Lisa hugged Mitsuki tightly.
As though realizing something, Mitsuki showed surprise on her face.
"—This sensation... Ahhh, I see now. That time, it was also you, Lisa-san, who..."
Mitsuki murmured in a trembling voice while letting Lisa hug her tightly.
Then despite some hesitation, Mitsuki still wrapped her arms around Lisa's back.
"Thank you... Lisa-san."
Although I had no idea what Mitsuki's murmurs meant, I could also feel that, in this very instant, the gulf between them had vanished.
—Thank goodness, you two...
"...Mononobe-kun, let's go over too."
I was watching over Mitsuki and Lisa from a slight distance, but Firill gave my back a push at this time.
"Huh? Go where—"
"There!"
Firill ignored my doubts and shoved me violently towards Mitsuki and Lisa, causing me to collide into them.
"Kyah!? M-Mononobe Yuu? W-What on earth are you doing!?"
"N-Nii-san!?"
"No, it's Firill who forced—"
"...Victory is a joy to be shared with everyone."
My posture was like hugging Mitsuki and Lisa. Then Firill pounced on my back. Instantly, the sensation of a soft and bountiful bosom was pressing against my back.
"Oh, wait for me, Mononobe!"
"—Ren, let's go over too."
"Mm."

Even Iris, Ariella and Ren joined in, instantly packing us together like sardines.
"M-Mononobe Yuu! Y-Your face is too close!"
"Nii-san! W-Where do you think you are touching!?"
Although Lisa and Mitsuki were complaining to me, there was no gap for me to escape.
"...Basilisk is defeated, congratulaions."
Firill cheered for victory in her usual calm voice.
"Congratulations! Wonderful, we won!"
Iris answered with a voice of cheerful vitality.
"Awesome!"
"Oh—"
Ariella raised her arms and cheered. Blushing, Ren cried out loudly in a rare moment.
—By this point, I might as well throw caution to the wind.
"Mitsuki, Lisa, it's our turn next."
Grabbing Mitsuki and Lisa's arms in my left and right respectively, I raised them to the sky.
"Great! We WONNNNNNNNNNNNNNN!!"
Squeezing my voice out from the bottom of my abdomen, I yelled as hard as I could until my throat hurt.
Seeing me yell loudly next to them, Mitsuki and Lisa first showed wide-eyed shock on their faces then finally chuckled at the same time.
"...Lisa-san, shall we have a shout too?"
"Yes... It's not every day that we get a chance to do so."
Lisa coughed briefly then nodded in response to Mitsuki's question.
Then the two of them cheered together, allowing their voices of joy to resound across the blue sky.

Epilogue

"Really—Another of the great gods has been slain… How unfortunate. Thank you for your report."
Inside a certain room of a hotel in league with a dragon worshiping cult, the Sons of Muspell, Kili listened to the report from a spy who had infiltrated NIFL. The air of solemnity exuded from her voice and expression was quite befitting of the "shrine maiden" who was the cult's leader.
But the instant she hung up the phone, that aura of holiness was instantly swept away.
Leaning herself tightly against the sofa, Kili smiled as though feeling happiness from the bottom of her heart.
"That's amazing—as expected of the man who caught my eye."
Kili kept swaying her legs, unable to contain her joy.
"Although I'm curious about where Code Fünf went, compared to that, mother's intentions are the first priority right now. With this, the initial plan has failed, which is great, so what is her plan here on, I wonder—"
Kili sounded like she was enjoying the misfortune of others. However, she suddenly showed a painful look on her face.
"Ow…!?"
She looked at the back of her right hand where her dragon mark was located. Normally, it was a faintly visible pattern but now, it was emitting black light.
"Mother?"
Just as Kili frowned in puzzlement, dark matter flowed out of the blackened dragon mark in the form of bubbles. Then the surging flow of dark matter covered Kili's right hand within the blink of an eye.
"What the heck does she want—Gah!?"
The intense pain attacking her right hand was making Kili lean backwards, crying out in pain. Although she waved her hand, trying to shake off the dark matter, dark matter kept flowing out, impossible to fling away.
"This feeling… Biogenic, transmutation…?"
Pressing on her right hand, Kili gritted her teeth and endured the pain.
Several minutes later, the flow of dark matter from the dragon mark stopped suddenly.
Utterly exhausted, Kili collapsed on the floor.
"—Huff, huff, huff… Ahhh, I get it now…"
While panting, Kili's mouth twisted into a grin.

"...You intend to dispose of me after use, mother."
Kili remarked sarcastically then slowly got up and examined the dragon mark on her right hand.
"Although there are almost no options left... Isn't remodeling your daughter going a bit too far?"
Kili's dragon mark was glowing with faint yellow light.
"But I don't hate you, because thanks to your remodeling, I finally seem to be—free."
Pressing on her dragon mark that had changed in color, Kili smiled.
"But at this rate, the game will end soon. What should I do...?"
Kili held her hand next to her mouth and started thinking. At that moment, she saw the newspaper on the living room table and narrowed her eyes.
"Death of Albert Crest, present monarch of the Principality of Erlia—I remember this is a country that devoted the most effort towards protecting the human rights of Ds, because a D had been born in their royal family..."
Kili murmured to herself then a mysterious light shone in her eyes.
"Fufu—Perfect, I shall make use of this country. Now that it's decided, I'd better get moving quickly."
Kili deftly started making travel preparations and said with delight:
"Looks like we will meet again soon. I'm so looking forward to it—Yuu."

*

The transport ship sailed back to Midgard. The moon and the stars were shining in the sky, decorating the sea with glittering brightness under the darkness of night.
I went onto the deck and leaned against the railing, staring out into the horizon where the sky met the sea.
"Oh, Yuu—You're here."
Tia jogged over to me with two glasses in her hand. Judging from the color, they probably contained orange juice.
"Are you looking for me?"
Hearing me ask that, Tia pouted a little angrily.
"Because Yuu disappeared from the party so suddenly. Tia wanted to have a toast with Yuu."
"But didn't we already toast in the beginning?"
"Tia wants to toast more times! Toasting is like sharing joyful feelings, it's very happy!"
Tia insisted in a strong tone of voice.
Currently, there was a victory party in the ship. Midgard staff were taking part and the dining hall serving as the venue was packed full of people.
Although it was a merry event, perhaps because everyone was female apart from me, I kept getting hassled by drunken older women, which was why I escaped outside for now.
"—Got it. I'll take a break then head back. You return to the dining hall first."
"No, if Yuu is staying here, Tia will stay together too!"

Seeing Tia had made up her mind not to go, I exhaled. I could not just leave her standing here with two glasses like this.
"In that case, let's sit down over there for a bit."
I took a glass from Tia and went over to the benches at the back of the deck. Sitting side by side on plastic benches that were not too sturdy, we clanged our glasses together for a toast.
"Cheers."
"Cheers!"
Grinning from ear to ear, Tia drank from her glass. I took a sip to moisten my throat. The sourness of orange juice was soothing my exhausted body.
"The stars are so pretty!"
"—Yeah."
We chatted briefly while drinking juice from our glasses.
Time passed by quietly. Finally, a serious expression surfaced on Tia's childish face.
"...Yuu, thank you. You returned safe and sound... Thank goodness."
Tia placed her empty glass on the side and wrapped her arm around my arm.
"Tia was afraid the whole time. After separating from Yuu and everyone, Tia was thinking the whole time, what to do if we never saw each other again...? So scary, Tia shivered in fright. The Yuu here—Tia is not dreaming, right?"
"Don't worry, you're not dreaming. I'm definitely here."
To reassure Tia, I tried to answer in as gentle a tone as possible.
"...Yeah, Tia can feel Yuu's warmth, Tia really does... love Yuu. Tia cannot stand being just a fiancee. Tia wants to hurry and get married... with Yuu."
Resting her head against my shoulder, Tia spoke quietly.
"Huh—"
I grew frantic, never expecting her to bring up this topic now. And Tia was looking up at me, tilting her head to ask:
"...No? Tia really loves Yuu! Or maybe... Yuu dislikes a girl with these things...?"
Tia touched the two tiny horns on her head.
Hearing her say that, I felt a stabbing pain in my chest.
I was partially responsible for Tia ending up with this appearance.
If I had sent her to Midgard the first time we met—Tia would never have encountered Kili.
"Not at all—Tia, your horns are very cute."
Precisely because she had chosen to live as a human, Tia felt an inferiority complex regarding her horns.
I placed my hand on her head and deliberately stroked her horns.
"...Mm... I-It tickles... Aww..."
"Oh, sorry. I think you said the horns are very sensitive."
"Yeah... Tia isn't very sure, but because the horns are connected to the inside of the head, they can't be removed by surgery."
Inside of the head—In other words, it connected directly to the brain?

Kili said she had given Tia these horns using biogenic transmutation in order to turn Tia into a dragon.
I originally thought that her intention was purely to alter Tia's perceptions, to make Tia think she was no longer human... But perhaps there might be other purposes at work.
"—Tia, you're fine the way you are. No need to be concerned about the horns. It's part of your charm, Tia. I think you can be proud of them instead."
"Really!? Yuu, thank you—Tia is so happy!"
Tia wrapped her arms around my neck and hugged me.
"T-That hurts."
"Yuu, Tia really loves you! Let's get married immediately!"

"No, umm—"
I answered vaguely.
"...Tia knows that because of human rules, it's not allowed without everyone's approval. But even just a wedding between the two of us is fine—Will you be Tia's husband?"
Close enough to feel each other's breaths, I met her gaze and listened to her proposal.
Seeing her sincere gaze, I resolved myself. I could no longer delay my answer by using the excuse that Tia was still a child.
"Of course, rules are part of the reason, but... I can't marry you because of something else."
"...Something else?"
Tia watched me with uneasy eyes.
"—There's someone I already like."
I told her calmly but clearly.
"Eh...?"
"But actually it's uncertain... To be honest, I'm not very confident at all, it's just that—It's absolutely true that I can't get her out of my mind... So with the way things are, I can't marry you, Tia."
Tears appeared from Tia's eyes.
"Yuu... You don't like Tia?"
"N-No, I like you, Tia. I also find you very cute. I want to help you at all times and save you when you're in danger. I guess there are even stronger feelings than that...?"
I explained to her in a stammer. I absolutely did not want to abandon Tia.
"Then... Yuu plans on marrying that person?"
"Eh? I-I don't really know about the future. Besides, we haven't reached that stage at all—"
Wavering, I answered, only to see Tia wipe her tears away on the back of her hand.
"In that case, Tia will start working hard!"
"By working hard... What are you going to work hard at?"
Feeling unease in my heart, I asked her.
"Tia will work hard to make Yuu fall in love with Tia! Compared to the person Yuu likes right now, to love Tia more, even more!"
"What..."
Hearing Tia's declaration, I was stunned.
"Tia's temptation will spin Yuu in circles, making Yuu's heart flutter because of Tia!"
Saying that, Tia hugged me as hard as she could.
"T-Temptation... Do you really know what that word means? You're getting too close. Can you move a bit away?"
"No. Doing this will make men's hearts flutter. Tia learned from manga borrowed from Firill."
Tia clutched my clothing tightly, refusing to leave no matter what.

I was left without a choice, unsure what to do. It would be too pitiful if I pulled her away forcibly, she would surely cry.
However, after a while, Tia's body suddenly relaxed. I looked at her and saw that she was nodding off to sleep.
She was sleepy, apparently.
Having worried for the entire day, she must be exhausted.
Hence, I changed tactics. Stroking Tia's lovely hair, I sang a lullaby.
For some reason, the lyrics came out naturally.
Although I could no longer remember whom I was singing this kind of song to in the past.
Tia immediately began to sleep soundly. Her relaxed body was about to slide off. Hence, I hastily held her and laid her out to sleep on the bench, using my lap as a pillow.
"Mmm... Yuu..."
Tia called my name from her dream.
Her sleeping face looked even more childish than her usual appearance.
I managed to handle her today, but it looked like things were only going to get tougher starting tomorrow.
"...Nii-san?"
Hearing Mitsuki's voice, I looked up, only to see Mitsuki poking her head out from around a corner. Seeing us, she walked over.
"I knew it, the person singing was you, Nii-san... How nostalgic."
"You know this song too, Mitsuki?"
"Of course I do. That was the lullaby my mother used to sing for us all the time."
Mitsuki answered with a wry smile. However, there was something wrong with what she said that unsettled me.
—My mother?
Mitsuki normally referred to our parents as father and mother without specifying...
Not noticing my bafflement, Mitsuki peered at Tia who was sleeping on my lap.
"So soundly asleep... Let me carry her back to her cabin."
Saying that, Mitsuki picked up Tia lightly in her arms.
"Well, if she needs to be carried, let me—"
"A girl's room should not be entered lightly."
Speaking as a student council president should, Mitsuki vetoed my suggestion.
In this manner, Mitsuki carried Tia and was about to leave when she looked back as though she recalled something.
"—Nii-san, I have caused you plenty of trouble this time. It is all thanks to you that I can smile and chat with Lisa-san again."
"I simply gave you a push. You're the one who took actual action."
I looked away in embarrassment.

"Even so... I am still very grateful to you. In the past, I always believed I did not deserve forgiveness and treated pain and suffering as a kind of punishment, but... in the end, that was relying on others too."
Mitsuki smiled wryly and continued.
"I still cannot forgive myself but even so, I now know the difference between that and giving things up on my own. Hence—I have decided that I will not give up on you, Nii-san."
"Huh... Give up on me?"
Not knowing what she was talking about, I repeated her words as a question.
My heart was pounding rapidly. Feeling a premonition that something irrevocable was about to happen, my body froze.
Mitsuki was about to say something that I did not know about.
"The day we became siblings, Nii-san… You promised me, right? Even after becoming siblings... You will still love me more than anyone else and that you will marry me when we grow up..."
"——"
I could not answer a single word.
I understood that a wooden stake had been stabbed into my heart, impossible to lift up again.
Now that my premonition had turned into reality, I could not go back.
—Ahhh, so this is the situation? Have I already lost this much?
Lost, I murmured in my mind.
"After all, it was a verbal promise from childhood, so I have no intention of using that to bind you, Nii-san. Even if you fall in love with someone else, Nii-san... It cannot be helped. However, my feelings will never change. I just want to tell you that."
Even in the darkness of the night, I could tell that Mitsuki's face was bright red. Unable to face me directly any longer, she turned her back to me.
"T-Then, I shall excuse myself."
Carrying Tia, Mitsuki left rapidly. But to the very end, let alone say something, I could not even manage to lift a finger.
That was how great a shock my heart had suffered. My mind was total chaos.
How long did I stand there in shock? My body felt cold from the sea breeze then I started walking to my cabin on unsteady steps.
—*Became* siblings? In other words, we were not siblings prior to that.
To think I had forgotten something like that and even went as far as to declare myself proudly to be Mitsuki's older brother?
Good grief—I wanted to laugh at how absurd I was.
Then there was the fact that I had clearly lost what were supposed to be my most cherished emotions, yet I was not aware at all... This filled me with abject terror.
Then wasn't I like a completely different person for real?

I was in no mood to return to the party so I went straight to my cabin without passing by the dining hall.
But in front of my door, I met the person I wanted to encounter least in this situation.
"Oh, it's you, Mononobe!"
The silver-haired girl—Iris—turned her head towards me frantically.
"...Iris, why did you come here?"
Although I could guess what it was about, I was simply asking her in order to buy some time. I wanted a bit of time to stabilize my emotions.
"U-Umm... We promised, right? After the battle against Basilisk—Mononobe, you'll tell me your feelings."
Iris' answer was just as I predicted.
Yeah—Definitely. Until just now, that was what I intended to do too.
Precisely because of that, I could answer Tia's proposal without any pretense.
But—
"Mononobe...? Are you okay? You look like you're about to cry, you know?"
"—!"
I could no longer hold it back.
I did not want her to see my disgraceful look, then wanting to hold onto something, I embraced Iris.
"Kyah!? M-Mononobe... Umm, seriously, what's with you? You're acting a bit weird, you know?"
"...Sorry, my reply—Please let me say it like this."
I spoke quietly in a hoarse voice.
"S-Sure... That's fine..."
Despite feeling troubled, Iris agreed.
Hence, I inhaled and spoke with determination.
I voiced my completely genuine feelings.
"I think I definitely—love you, Iris."
It probably started on our first encounter.
Iris had appeared before me, completely nude. And the core of these feelings of mine must have taken root the instant our eyes met back then.
This was probably what people called love at first sight.
"R-Really!?"
Iris asked in surprise.
If it was before I heard what Mitsuki said, all I needed to do now was nod.
However, I could not do that.
I could not lie to Iris.
Precisely because I loved her, I could not deceive her.
"Yeah—But the me who loves you, Iris, might not be the real me."
I told her as though forcing my voice out. Whether to me or to Iris, this was a very cruel fact, and... to Mitsuki as well.
"What... do you mean?"

While she showed unease on her face, I whispered in her ear the secret I had never told anyone until now.
"To be honest, I... have lost quite a lot of my past memories."
It was the downside to making a deal with Yggdrasil.
The price paid to obtain knowledge of power.
To prevent Mitsuki from feeling she was to blame, I had kept my scars hidden till now.
"Eh...? M-Memories? What are you suddenly talking about?"
Iris asked uneasily. Although I understood clearly how she felt, I still had not finished my story.
No... Actually, I ought to end it here. Say that it was a joke then dismiss it somehow. That was the correct way.
Not just for Mitsuki but to protect Iris as well, I had sacrificed my memories as the price. If I did not want her to feel responsible, I should keep my secret from Iris as well.
Unable to lie to the one I love, describing it that way sounded so righteous.
This confession was merely to get Iris to dote on me, right?
Simply trying to shift this burden, impossible to bear alone, shoving it onto Iris, isn't it?
"Hence..."
However, I could not stop. I could not suppress it no matter what.
If I kept it hidden in my heart, I would be crushed.
If I forcibly held it back, I would break down.
Irresponsibly, I was hoping, if it was Iris, perhaps she would accept me.
My own wishful thinking wanted her to support me.
Like the contents of a ruptured dam, my words kept spilling out...
"The one I truly love, is probably—"
On that day, I confessed everything to Iris.

「本当の俺が好きだったのは、たぶん――」
その日、俺はイリスに全てを打ち明けた。

Afterword

Hello again, I'm Tsukasa.
Thank you for buying Unlimited Fafnir III, Crimson Catastrophe.
Although Volume 3 took just as long as Volumes 1 and 2 to be released, due to end-of-year schedules, the release dates of January books are moved earlier to the end of December, so it feels like there was less of a gap between this volume and the previous one.
Actually, it's just a difference of a few days. Human perceptions are quite uncanny.
This shares similarities with seeing something priced at 298 yen in the supermarket and inexplicably thinking "it costs two-hundred-something." But this sort of illusion would be dispelled at the checkout counter. It's actually quite troublesome due to seeing figures greater than expected.
Some people say there is magic in words and languages, while the numbers "98" feel like they have actual power, even to the point of driving the economy. Illusions can be scary.
But so-called illusions—or rather, human preconceptions and jumping to conclusions—As long as they're used appropriately, they're actually quite convenient.
Take my case for example. I frequently indulge in my imagination, thus blurring my sense of time.
It started back in primary school. I didn't notice it in particular when walking home from school with friends, but whenever I was alone, I would find the distance home abnormally far. Especially in the summer when it was hot and stuffy, the faster I wanted to get home, the heavier each step seemed to feel...
But during those times, I would seriously imagine "if dragons appeared here, what would I do to survive?" then reflect on solutions. Before I knew it, I would arrive home—This was a strange experience which made me feel as though time had flown by.
To my young self, that feeling was like "actual magic that could be used." Then before I knew it, imagination became my tool for controlling my sense of time.
It was very suited to long-distance travel or when waiting. It takes about two and a half hours to get to Tokyo from my parent's house in Kyoto (taking the bullet train), but by relying on imagination—or rather, making drafts for novels—this journey would turn into something instantaneous.

But after starting this job, I discovered this magic's only drawback.
Namely, the acceleration of time during imagination seems to always happen during my writing process, so hours and days go by rapidly in an instant. Then the deadlines come approaching with frightening speed.
In these situations, I would want to have more time, so it feels like a bit of a bad deal.
I guess this is what they call tradeoffs.
The same goes for this afterword. Counting from when I started writing, an hour has already zoomed by without me noticing, so it's almost time to wrap things up.
Korie Riko-sensei, thank you again for your lovely illustrations! I'm so lucky to be able to see Iris and Lisa's magnificent scene in the hot spring. Mitsuki also looks very cool on the cover, and cute as well, it's awesome!
Editor in charge Shouji-sama, thank you for always handling things swiftly, it's really a great help. Your correct and rapid advice is very valuable, please continue to look after me.
Then I would like to thank all readers sincerely. It's all thanks to you that I am able to turn the "continuation" in my mind into something tangible.
Oh, finally, I have to report on the manga version.
The manga version will apparently be serialized in *Good! Afternoon* magazine. I think the latest news should be announced successively on the official website, so please show your support.
Well then, see you next time.

Tsukasa, November 2013

Illustrator's Afterword

あとがき

祝！
3巻発売です！
深月ちゃんに
添寝してもらい
たいぷろ

3巻、衝撃のラスト
でしたね!!
次巻もお楽しみに♪

柚木リンゴ

Congratulations!
Volume 3 is released!
I really want Mitsuki-chan to share my bed.
The ending of Volume 3 is so shocking!!
Please look forward to the next volume!

Korie Riko

Back to Volume 2